

JUNE, 1957

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THE SINISTER INVASION

by Alexander Blade

ANC IMAGINATION SCIENCE FICTION



SCIENCE FICTION

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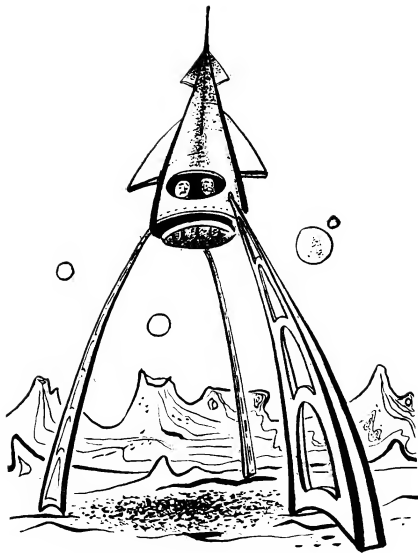
We must admit we're suckers for anything having to do with Flying Saucers. Like this month's cover by Lloyd Rognan. Pretty smooth, eh? — And of course the story by Alex Blade, from which the cover scene was suggested, is top-notch stuff too. Should prove to be one of your favorite issues.

Speaking of flying saucers reminds us that we ought to give a plug here for a friend of ours — Ray Palmer. Ray, as you know has been as close to the saucer business as anyone in the world; matter of fact it was Ray (then editor of **AMAZING STORIES**) who cracked the saucer story wide-open when Kenneth Arnold first saw them over Mt. Ranier back in '47. Well, anyway, Ray informs us he's bringing out a new science fiction magazine to be called **FLYING SAUCERS**. We don't know what the magazine will actually be like at this point, but we pass along the information to you, suggesting you watch your newsstand.

Science fiction continues to crop up in slick magazines. Might as well give a plug here for our men's magazine, **ROGUE**, which will feature a science fiction yarn in its June issue — on sale the last week in April. Yarn is entitled **VOYAGE**

TO EDEN, by Mark Reinsberg, who you've seen in these pages a number of times recently. Very good yarn which we're sure you won't want to miss. **ROGUE** will also feature a science fiction story in its July issue, by Charles DeVet, entitled, **DREAM STUFF**. So if you're not already a reader of our men's magazine, now's the time to get acquainted — and enjoy some really slick science fiction! (Bob Bloch is on hand every issue too, writing satire as only Bloch can do it. Bet you don't need further inducement!)

We'd like to call your attention this month to the **NEW** book-subscription offer on page 130. This is another "first" for **MADGE** and our companion magazine, **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. Included in the book offer is **EMPIRE OF THE ATOM** by Van Vogt — a book that has just been published and put on sale in the book stores. So why pay \$3.00 for your copy when you can have it *absolutely free*! Never in the history of science fiction has there been such an offer. We're pleased to be able to pass it along to you as an inducement to subscribe. If you already are a subscriber, extend your subscription by checking the space provided on the coupon. In any event, get your order in right away. Be seeing you next issue



"Good Lord, Jacobs—we forgot the ladder!"



THE SINISTER INVASION

by

Alexander Blade

Birrell rebelled at the idea of becoming a cosmic counter-spy. But he was the one Earthman whom a quirk of nature had fitted for the job...

IT WAS STRANGE, how easy it was to step right out of your own life, right out of the familiar Earth into cosmic mystery! As easy, Birrel was to think later, as opening a door....

As Birrel walked into his 71st Street apartment, snapping on the light and pocketing his keys, he suddenly stopped, tense with surprise.

A man he had never seen before



stood facing him. A commonplace-looking man with a gray hat, gray suit, and a grayish, young-middle-aged face. His voice was mild as he said,

"Ross Birrel?"

"That's right," said Birrel. Then anger swept away his astonishment. "Who are you and how the hell did you get in here?"

"We'll discuss that later," said the gray man. "Right now, I want you to come with me. Official business."

"What kind of official business?"

"We'll discuss that later too."

Birrel started forward, his temper dangerously high. Then he stopped. The gray man's hand was in his coat pocket, and it was gripping something in that pocket. He said,

"Please don't be difficult, Mr. Birrel."

Birrel said, "If you're an official of some sort, let's see your credentials."

"I'm afraid," said the other, "I don't have any."

"I thought so." Birrel began to breathe hard. "Listen, you've made a mistake. I'm not a rich man, or a rival gangster, or anybody you want. I'm an electrical engineer, a bachelor, and I'm stone broke."

"We know that," murmured the gray man. "Now will you come along?"

Birrel suddenly decided that the man was crazy. New York was full of nuts these days, people flipping their lids and doing daffy things. This was one of them — and there was only one thing to do.

"All right, but you'll regret this," he said. He started to turn his back on the gray man. "When you find out you're wrong —"

Birrel, turning, whirled with sudden speed, his arm snaking out to catch the gray man's neck with the edge of his hand, the old trick they'd taught him in the OSS in war-time.

It didn't work.

The gray man ducked and chopped expertly with his left hand. A numbing pain hit Birrel's extended arm.

For the first time, the gray man smiled. "Sorry. But I was in the OSS too, you see."

Birrel, holding his aching arm, stared. This wasn't a nut after all. But what —?

"Look, Mr. Birrel. I have no sinister designs against you, in any way. We merely have a proposition to put to you. You can accept or refuse it. But unfortunately, I have to do this secretly. That's why I couldn't phone or write or approach you in public."

Birrel thought rapidly. Not a nut, no. But what kind of official

business would have to be done *this* secretly? He didn't like it, not at all.

"Shall we go?"

Birrel looked at the hand in the coat pocket. He went.

He came out into the cool dark wetness of 71st Street, the summer shower over and the red and white neon signs toward Broadway reflected cheerily on wet asphalt. A sedan, with a man at its wheel, was waiting.

He heard the mild voice close behind his ear. "Get right in, Mr. Birrel."

The car swept them up the West Side Highway, with the electric glow of Manhattan behind them. Ahead, the strung-out lights of George Washington Bridge arched the black gulf of the river.

Birrel sat in the back seat, with the gray man keeping well away from him at the other end of the seat. He could see nothing of the driver but a thick neck under a crusher hat.

They crossed the Hudson and went on westward, skirting cities and running quietly and fast through a region of small factories and junk-heaps and power-plants.

Birrel felt a mounting panic. What the devil had he got mixed up in? He tried to think why anyone would want to grab him like this.

He couldn't think of anything. Since the war he'd completed his education, taken his engineering degree, landed a job in a Long Island electric company, and — that was all. He didn't know any technical secrets, he wasn't doing any top-secret work, he was an utterly undistinguished thirty-year-old engineer and nothing more.

Then why?

"Listen," he said, "I know there's a mistake —"

"No mistake," said the gray man. He added, "We're nearly there."

"There" was a high wire fence with a locked gate and a red sign, INDUSTRIAL CYANOGEN COMPANY — DANGER, KEEP OUT. A man came out of a little wooden building inside the gate, and unlocked and opened it. The car went on through.

It stopped, after a moment, in front of a big, dark old-fashioned brick factory building with a forlorn, out-of-date look about it. The only light was a dingy bulb over the door in front.

"This is it, Birrel. Come along."

Inside, Birrel got a shock of surprise. It wasn't the cavernous, dark interior he expected. There was light, the sound of clicking typewriters and teletypes, the clack of heels on corridor floors.

THE OLD FACTORY building, he saw now was a blind. Behind its dingy walls and masked windows were at least two floors of offices. The doors of them all were closed, but he heard the hum and buzz of earnest activity from behind them.

Gray-face nudged him toward one of the doors. The thick-necked driver went on somewhere.

Birrel looked around a featureless little office with a battered table, some office chairs, and nothing else.

He turned. "What the devil is this place?"

"A government agency," said Gray-face.

Birrel said, "Listen, how long are you going to keep this —"

He stopped, and was aware that his jaw was hanging in foolish surprise. A man had come into the office.

A stocky, iron-haired man of fifty or more, with a heavy, seamed face and eyes not much softer than flint. Birrel had never seen him face to face before, but he knew him.

"Why —"

"Yes," said Gray-face, obviously enjoying himself. "It's Mr. John Connor." He turned and said, "Here he is, Mr. Connor. I believe he thought we were taking him for a ride."

"All right, Paley," said Connor brusquely. "Sit down. Birrel. Sorry to haul you out here but this is important. Will you take that moronic stare off your face and *sit down?*"

Birrel sat, swallowing hard. This he hadn't expected.

He had been in the OSS more than a year, and he'd never even got within shouting distance of John Connor, the most famous of its directing brains. And now, eleven years later, to meet him this way in a masked factory that was an office —

Birrel said, weakly, "Then this is a government agency?"

"It is," said Connor. "The most secret one of all. We don't give out interviews, and have addresses, like the CIA and FBI." He nodded toward the gray-faced man. "You'll understand why I sent Paley for you this way, why I couldn't write or phone you."

"But I thought you'd retired, after the war!" Birrel said. "The newspapers —"

John Connor said disgustedly, "The hell and all of an OSS man you must have been, if you believe everything you read in newspapers."

Birrel thought he understood now. One of the secret counter-espionage agencies by which America defended itself — so secret that probably few government

—officials even knew about it. But —

Connor's rough voice answered his thought. "We need a man, Birrel. For a job. And it must be a man we can trust absolutely. That's why we looked through the OSS files — and found you."

"Oh, now, listen," protested Birrel, rising. "My service was years ago, I've got a profession, and this isn't wartime now. You can find better agents than me —"

Connor said brutally, "I could find five hundred agents better than you. I'd rather have any one of them than you. Unfortunately, you've got something they haven't."

"What?"

"The right face, Birrel."

Birrel didn't get it, he didn't get it at all. But Connor gave him no time to think. He demanded,

"You'd help us if you thought it might mean life or death to your country, wouldn't you?"

Birrel knew he was about to be trapped, but there was only one way you could answer that. "Sure, but —"

Connor cut him off. "Fine. Now I'm going to show you someone, Birrel. Come along."

They went out of the office, and down a long corridor and then down a flight of concrete steps. Connor said nothing on the way,

and neither did Paley.

The cement-walled basement corridor below was chilly. Lights glowed in its ceiling. In front of a closed steel door stood an alert young man with a submachine-gun cradled in his arm.

Connor nodded to him and said, "All right." He produced a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

Not until they were inside the room, and the door locked behind them, did either Connor or Paley say another word.

Birrel's glance darted around. The room, an ice-cold concrete cubicle, had nothing in it at all but a hospital table on which lay a long something covered by a sheet. From it came a strongly chemical smell.

He felt a wave of relief. So that was why he had been brought here with all the hush-hush —to identify a dead someone? It was the only possible explanation —

"Six weeks ago," Connor was saying, "near one of our most secret atomic depots, a prowler was challenged. He tried to escape. He was shot and instantly killed."

He said then, "All right, Paley. Uncover him."

Paley went to the table. He took hold of the white sheet. His hand trembled a little, and there were sudden beads of sweat on his fore-

head despite the freezing cold of the room. He looked as though he did not want at all to carry out the order.

Connor's harsh breathing was loud. Birrel wondered why they were so affected. Surely not by the sight of a dead man — they, even more than he, had seen plenty of dead men in the war years.

The sheet was pulled halfway back. A naked man lay on the table, his dark eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

He was fairly young, black-haired, with faintly swarthy skin and a blocky, undistinguished face. He looked vaguely familiar. . .

With a shock, Birrel realized that the dead man looked not unlike himself. Not a twin-like resemblance, but still, a strong resemblance.

He looked up quickly to Connor. He was amazed by the expression in Connor's heavy face. The lines in it had deepened. His half-narrowed eyes stared almost hauntedly at the dead man.

Paley had moved back from the table, and there was a strain in his gray face as he looked across the body at them.

"He was a spy," Connor said. "There's no doubt about that at all. And a very skillful one, to get into that guarded area."

Birrel asked, "From what coun-

try?"

Connor looked at him. He said, "From no country. You see, we ran a post-mortem on him, and —"

He stopped. He looked as though he didn't want to say what he was going to say, as though he had to force himself against a whole lifetime's beliefs and thinking, to say this thing.

"He wasn't an Earth man at all. He was from somewhere else. Some other world."

CHAPTER II

BIRREL STILL COULDN'T take it in.

Two hours had passed, and he sat in Connor's office, listening, arguing, still not believing.

Paley was there, hunched as though half asleep in a chair in the corner. There was another man there, a young man named Garlock, with glittering eyeglasses and teeth and a sharp voice. But Connor did most of the talking.

"I *know* it's fantastic," he said, for the tenth time. "But it's so."

"But he looks human —," Birrel said, again.

"He *is* human. But he's different. His blood is a type no one ever saw before. His cells, his nervous-system, his bone-and-muscle tissue, they're all different from an Earth-

man's. Unmistakably. I could give you Dr. Blount's report, but it wouldn't mean anything to you. If you'd seen Blount's face, that alone would have convinced you."

"But this is 1956," Birrel argued. "We're still only talking about space-flight. And only crackpots believe in ships and people from other worlds."

Connor winced. "Don't. It's like hearing a playback of what I said to Blount. Listen. We had the two most qualified biologists in the country check that body. They agree utterly. It's non-terrestrial."

Birrel opened his mouth to say something and then shut it. He had nothing more to say.

He faced the enormity of an impossible fact, just as these men had had to face it. A man, a visitor, a secret visitor, from another world. In this hard, matter-of-fact office, it seemed impossible, like a story read and thrown away, like a crazy movie you laughed at as you went out. The George Washington Bridge was only a few miles away, and tomorrow the Giants played the Pirates, and Friday was payday, and a man had come from another world.

"But from where?" Birrel whispered, finally. "And *why*?"

Connor sighed heavily. "Now we're getting somewhere. I know how hard it is to take. Every

morning I wake up, I think at first it was just a wild dream —" He broke off, then said harshly, "From where? We don't know, haven't an idea. The sky is full of worlds. Take your pick."

A nightmare kaleidoscope of all the stars and planets of the universe rushed through Birrel's head. The sky is full of worlds. Yes. He'd never quite realized it before.

"As to why, there's no doubt at all," Connor was saying. "The man was killed near one of the most heavily guarded atomic weapon depots we have. He was killed trying to escape. He was a spy."

"A spy, for —" Birrel's voice trailed away.

"That's right, Birrel. For someplace else, someplace not on Earth."

Garlock spoke up to Connor, interrupting. "You're giving it to him too fast, John. It took us weeks, and yet you haul him in and hit him in the face with the whole picture. More time —"

"I'm running this, and we haven't got more time," Connor said roughly.

Birrel hardly heard them. He felt as though an earthquake had rocked his mind, had shaken up all his preconceived ideas, all the bases of his thinking for a lifetime.

"But," he said slowly to Connor, "a spy from someplace out-

side, from another world — does that mean danger? A threat, out there?"

Connor spread his big, spatulate hands on the desk. "We don't know. We don't know what it means. But this agency has top responsibility for the country's safety against secret enemies. Whether they're Earthmen or not! We have to assume it *does* mean a threat."

"Yet it could be just accident, his being near the atomic depot?" A thought sprang into Birrel's mind. "A visitor from outside, coming secretly, wanting to learn about our science —"

Connor smiled grimly. "I wish I could think so. But we know it isn't so. Show him what we found, Jay."

Garlock went to a safe and unlocked it and took out a small object and came back. He said to Birrel,

"We found two things beside the man himself. A quarter-mile from him we found a queer burned place in the ground, a charred gouge. We don't understand it at all. The other thing we found was in his pocket. This."

He put the little object on the desk. To Birrel, it looked rather like a black plastic film-viewer of the type used for looking at colored slides. He said so, and Garlock

nodded.

"That's just what it is. Only it's the someplace-else type of viewer. I'll turn it on. Then you look into it."

His nerves taut, Birrel put the lenses to his eyes. Would he look at the incredible vistas of another planet, at —

But no. He was looking at a colored picture of a big laboratory's interior, and it was definitely an Earth lab of the present day. He could name many of the gadgets in the room. It looked like an atomic experimenter's workshop, on a big scale.

Birrel got that one glimpse and then started violently and tore the viewer away from his eyes.

A MAN'S VOICE HAD SPOKEN, close to his ear — small in volume but rapid, authoritative, precise in diction.

The language it spoke was one he had never heard.

"What—?" he cried, startled. Connor and Garlock nodded. "The voice," said the latter, "is on the film."

"And that," Connor said flatly, "was a picture of the most secret atomic laboratory at Los Alamos." He reached out and took the viewer into his own hand. "There are fifty-six pictures in this thing, each with a detailed vocal commen-

tary like that you heard. They're pictures—*detailed* pictures—of top-secret atomic depots, storehouses and arsenals."

"But how could they—," Birrel began. Connor cut him off.

"We haven't the faintest idea how. They've obviously got instruments that we don't have, for looking into places. 'Why' and 'who' are what we want to know. Especially, 'Who'."

He got up and walked back and forth in a little pattern. With a shock of surprise, Birrel realized that it was not yet midnight. It seemed that an eternity must have passed, not just a few hours.

Connor stopped and turned toward him. "That's where you come in, Birrel."

It wrenched Birrel suddenly back from his chaotic imaginings of far-away worlds and stars, of a cosmic plot and an unsuspecting Earth.

"Me?"

"You're going to help us find this ring of Someplace-else agents."

"But you said yourself you had better agents than me!"

Connor nodded. "But, as I told you, you have the right face. We went through photos of several thousand former agents to find your face, Birrel." He paused. Then— "Our only concrete lead to this bunch of whoever-they-are, is that dead man. He was one of

them. If he were alive, he could be trailed back to the others. But he isn't alive. So, to find that trail, we have to use a ringer."

Birrel was numb with, amazement, but he was not a fool, and he got Connor's implication instantly.

It was one of the oldest tricks in the book of counter-espionage. You had one of your own men pose as an enemy spy, so that a contact would be made that could lead you to the others. An old trick, and a risky one—even in ordinary circumstances. But in this case, it was fantastic.

"Oh, no," said Birrel. "It wouldn't work, there isn't a chance. I don't look that much like him—"

"You have the necessary basic feature," Connor said. "The skull-shape, the ears, the things that can't be disguised. Our make-up experts can do the rest."

"But how can I pose for a minute as that man, when I don't know his language? The first moment any of the others spoke to me, I'd be through."

"We can teach you a fair bit of the language," Connor said. "Enough so that you won't be instantly recognized as a fake. You'd soon be found out—but by then we'd be jumping on them."

Birrel stared, wondering if the strain of this hadn't been too much

for the man. "You can teach me some of that other-world language?"

Connor said, "Grossman can. He is, in case you don't know, one of the world's greatest philologists. He was called in on this weeks ago. Using that spoken commentary on the film-viewer, that voice that each time described a specific pictured scene, he worked away relating words and pictures until he built up the whole language. It's rough yet—but he's got a vocabulary of a couple thousand words, a set of grammar-rules, and — above all—an accurate reproduction of accent and pronunciation, in that recorded voice. Enough, with luck, to get you by for a little time with the others. That should be time enough for us."

Garlock interrupted, saying heatedly to Connor, "Look at his face! I tell you, you're giving this to him too fast, you can't throw it at him like this."

Connor ignored the protest. He sat down again at the desk, and his bleak eyes held on Birrel's face.

"This is how it stands. Where they came from, what that place is like, we haven't a glimmering. How many of them there are on Earth, we don't know either. But one man couldn't come alone. So there are others. All right."

He bent forward, his harsh voice beating at Birrel. "We make you look like that dead man. We have Grossman cram you with that language till you can get by. Then we stick you in jail. We announce that an unidentified spy was caught near an atomic installation, weeks ago, and that we're still holding him for questioning. We let that out in the newspapers."

"And then?"

Connor said, "The others—they'll be wondering what happened to their boy. He was alone on that job, we're sure of that. When they hear he's in prison, they'll surely try to contact him—you."

"What makes you so sure they will?"

"Because," Connor said slowly, "they have to. This is a secret operation. They must prevent our finding out who our prisoner is, finding out that he's from outside Earth."

His voice became raw-edged. "They're a threat, Birrel. Wherever they came from, they're danger. Perhaps the worst danger that ever threatened us. We have to find them. You have to help."

He did not ask for that help, he commanded it. And with a feeling of unreality, Birrel knew that he could not disobey that command.

Connor rose. "You'll stay here,

while we set this up. It'll take weeks, working every minute, to get you ready."

Weeks later, wearing another man's face, Birrel sat solitary in an isolated cell of a New York prison. He sat there unbelievably waiting for the impossible, for the secret ones from the wider cosmos.

He did not have to wait long.

CHAPTER III

THEY CAME AT TEN minutes before midnight.

Birrel had been sitting in this cell for some twenty hours. The cell was deep in a jail in downtown Manhattan. It was a solitary cell, for a solitary and important prisoner.

He had a different face now, a dead man's face. The clothing he wore had belonged to that man. He could speak that man's language, to a certain extent. He was not Ross Birrel, he was a man from Someplace-else.

"What's my name, on that other world?" Birrel wondered. *"I'm impersonating somebody and don't know who, or what, he was—"*

Except that the man he impersonated had been a spy. Secret agent of an unguessable, distant world, ferreting out Earth's defense secrets.

A wave of cold disbelief swept

Birrel. It was still too fantastic, too incredible. The scientists were wrong about that body, they must be wrong. Connor was wrong.

But Connor remained grimly convinced. Before his men took Birrel to the prison, he had said,

"They've lost an agent, those people from outside. A valuable man with valuable information. They'll contact you, somehow when our newspaper story appears."

"In a locked cell in prison?" Birrel had said, incredulously. "How can they?"

"I've an idea," Connor had said, "that they can do quite a lot of things we can't. But we'll be ready for them. The prison guards aren't in on our set-up, of course. But we'll be in the building, watching."

He had added, "You may not fool them long. But try. Remember, the important thing is to get them to lead you to the others, to the center of this thing, to their base, wherever it is. We'll follow."

That had been twenty hours ago. And now Birrel sat in the cold, stone-walled little cell, and stared at the blank steel door, and told himself that he was a fool, and that Connor was mad.

No one could reach him here, even if anybody tried.

Birrel suddenly looked up. Something had happened to the light, the single bulb that illuminated

his cell.

A greenish tinge had come into the light. It deepened, and there was a buzzing in his ears, and—

Birrel pitched to the floor, unconscious.

He came out of blackness, later, with a vague consciousness of someone touching him and the sound of a voice in his ears.

It was a woman's voice, low and hurried and husky with strain. He didn't know what it was saying, the words didn't make sense—

Of a sudden, Birrel's heart pounded. Some of those words, those strange-sounding syllables, *did* make sense. They were words he had learned in the weeks of preparation—words that Grossman, the philologist, had beaten into him by endless repetitions.

The words — the language — of the secret ones from Someplace-else.

He wrenched his eyes open. He looked into the dark, handsome face of a young woman. Her eyes were brilliant with excitement, and her hands were shaking Birrel by the shoulders. She spoke swiftly to him again, and now his clearing mind could translate the words.

"Rett, there's little time! Please!"

"Rett?" That was a word he didn't know. But of course—that would be his name. Or, rather, the

name of the man he impersonated. Rett—

Birrel was too foggy yet to try to answer, in that alien language. He was dazed, off balance, and dared not make a slip.

She helped him to his feet. His legs were like strings. He felt as though a pile-driver had hit him. What had happened?

Hanging to the edge of the bunk for support, Birrel stared groggily. He saw now that the girl wore an ordinary tan suit, with no covering on her shoulder-length black hair. Beyond her, the steel-door now gaped wide open. How had it been opened? And what had struck him senseless? There had been a sudden greenishness in the light—

The light was *still* green, a baleful emerald tinge. He didn't understand. He looked down at himself, and found that around his neck now hung a chain from which depended an egg of silvery metal. The egg hummed.

Birrel reached numb fingers toward the thing, but the girl caught away his hand. Again in that alien tongue, she said quickly,

"No, Rett—don't touch your shield! We have to get out fast—Holmer can't blank this building forever. Please try to walk!"

His shield? Shield against what? He saw now that she too wore a humming metal egg around her

neck.

Birrel's brain was beginning to clear. But he purposely kept his bewildered expression. Acting dazed would give him a little more time.

"Holmer"? he said.

"He's outside," the girl said. "Holding the—(and here she used a word Birrel did not know at all)—"on the whole building. But we must hurry!"

Birrel began to understand. They had come indeed, the secret ones from beyond the world. One of them, outside, had hit the whole prison with some stunning force, some super-encephalographic vibration. That was what had knocked him out. But the greenish glow was still there, the force still on. How was it he was conscious now?

Was the "shield" a shield against the stunning force? The girl had put it on him, and he had revived. And she was wearing one herself—

IT SUDDENLY RUSHED over Birrel, the full, overwhelming realization that he was face to face with someone not of Earth. He stared into her dark, smooth face, into her wide, worried black eyes, and he felt the short hairs on his neck bristle.

She seemed utterly human and Earthly, and she was not. The eyes meeting his had looked on unguessable vistas across the cosmic abyss.

The strong hands that steadied him were alien hands.

Woman not of this world

He shivered involuntarily and the girl misunderstood that. She said urgently,

"I know you're shaken up but you must walk! We must get out of here — come —"

She tugged him toward the open door of the cell. Birrel stumbled through it, with her. His feet would not coordinate, they kept scuffling and tripping as he went down the corridor and up the stair.

There was a guard office at the top of the stair. Two jail guards in uniform sprawled, one in a chair, the other on the floor. They were not dead, for he could see the rise and fall of their chests. But they were gripped by an insensibility like death.

Birrel began to get it. "Holmer can only hold the building blanked for a little longer!" The one outside, the confederate of the girl, had stricken everyone in the prison into a coma. Protected by a shield-device, she had walked right in, unchallenged.

The thought appalled Birrel. Connor and Paley and their men were in this building, waiting to follow Birrel and whoever contacted him. And Connor and Paley and the others must right now be as unconscious as these guards. Their

whole plan was shattered.

"Hurry, Rett!" She was urging him almost fiercely forward, out of the office and into a main hall.

They came to a barred door, now swinging open. How had she opened the doors, Birrel wondered? But a science that could throw this deathlike trance on a building full of men would make short work of locks.

The girl quickened her pace, urging him along faster. In a moment they came out into the darkness of the summer night, in a parking-court with a half-dozen official cars in it. The high gate to the street was closed. Just inside it was a long sedan whose motor purred softly. She ran toward it, her strong fingers clutching Birrel's wrist.

As she opened the rear door of the sedan, the flashing-on of the roof-light disclosed a man sitting at the wheel.

He was older than the girl, dark like her but with a craggy lined face, and eyes that might have been humorous if they were not so alert and alarmed. He too wore around his neck a silver egg that hummed.

"Kara, you took too long!" he said. "Any minute—"

"It took time to find him," she said. "I'll open the gate. No, Rett—you get in, quick!"

As Birrel climbed unsteadily into

the rear seat, the girl—so her name was Kara?—ran and swung open the street-gate, then ran back to the car.

Birrel's mind was clearing but things were happening too fast. He heard a continuous thin, whining sound that was coming from the front seat. It came from a square black box that rested on the seat beside the driver.

The girl Kara leaped into the back with Birrel and said, "Turn it off now, Holmer—and go!"

The man at the wheel reached and touched the box, and the whining sound ceased. Then, instantly, he snicked on the headlights, and sent the car leaping out through the open gate into the alley.

Within two minutes, they were out in the glittering stream of Fourth Avenue's night traffic, heading north.

Only then did the girl turn to Birrel. She said, almost passionately,

"Rett, where have you *been*? All these weeks, Holmer and I almost going crazy—"

Birrel had an answer for that, all prepared. "They caught me. They questioned me, time after time. Finally, when they couldn't get anything out of me, they were going to hold me for trial."

Kara nodded swiftly. "We guessed that, when we finally saw the

newspaper mention of an unidentified spy being held. They didn't suspect who you really are?"

He had his answer ready for that too. "No. They still don't dream of such a thing. They thought I was from another country here."

"But the Irrian?" Kara pressed. "What became of *him*?"

It took Birrel completely by surprise. "Irrian?" It was only a meaningless name to him. He had no answer for this, at all.

He said, floundering, "What do you mean—"

"Vannevan's man," she said, impatiently. "The Irrian you were trailing. Rett, try to clear your mind. Did the Earthmen catch the Irrian too?"

IT MADE NO SENSE at all to Birrel. All he could gather was that the dead spy, Rett, had, when killed near that atomic depot, been trailing someone. Someone called "the Irrian" and "Vannevan's man." Who was Vannevan?

He had to take a chance. He said, slowly, "I was the only one they captured."

She said again, "But what about the Irrian? Did you have to blast him?"

Birrel, his mind racing like a trapped animal seeking escape, suddenly remembered something.

The word "blast" made him remember. It was the thing that had puzzled Connor's agents, the charred gouge in the ground that they had found near the dead spy.

Again, he had to gamble. Aware that it was a complete leap in the dark he said,

"Yes. I had to blast him."

Her small, strong hands clenched together. "If only you could have taken him, as you planned. If we could have taken him back, it would be complete proof of what Vannevan's doing here."

Birrel couldn't get this at all. He was bewildered, all his previous assumptions and those of Connor completely upset.

They had had it figured out, they thought. The dead man was a spy from another world. He would have colleagues, a group who had come here to search out Earth's most potent defense secrets, with some deadly purpose surely. Birrel's job, his imposture, was to lead to the others.

But—it seemed now that these secret ones, this Kara and Holmer, themselves had enemies. The dead man, Rett, had been trailing one. An Irrian. Who were the Irrians? Who was Vannevan, and what was *he* up to?

A sense of nightmare unreality suddenly swept Birrel. Their car was crossing lower Times Square.

The blaze of lights, the after-show crowds, the winking signs—all were so utterly normal. And here, in the midst of it, he rode with a man and woman of a far world, speaking their language, talking tensely of things he didn't even understand.

Birrel felt a frantic desire to rip the door open and plunge out of the car, to run and lose himself in the cheerful crowds.

He couldn't. He'd taken the job and he had to go through with it—to find out where their base was, to find out what threat they represented.

"But I have to play it alone," he thought, with sinking heart.

Connor and Paley and the rest, who had planned so carefully to follow them, had never foreseen that stunning force that had struck.

Birrel became aware that they had crossed town and were running through the Lincoln Tunnel. In a few minutes they were on a main highway, heading north.

How long could he keep up this imposture? How long till he made some slip, some blunder—

Holmer, his voice quiet but with a sudden edge to it, said, "There's a car following us. I wasn't sure till we got through the Tunnel."

With sudden reaction, Birrel's hopes leaped. Then Connor and the others had come to in time

to follow? Yet it hardly seemed possible. . . .

"*Vannevan!*" Kara's exclamation was so fierce that it startled him.

"It can't be anybody else," Holmer grimly agreed. "That newspaper story about the captured spy—it drew *him* to the prison too, it seems."

Whoever Vannevan might be, Birrel thought, it was evident that these two hated and feared him like the devil.

Holmer gripped the wheel tighter, and the car suddenly lunged faster. He said, without turning, "You know what it means. The Irrians know now that we followed them to Earth. Hold on, we have to lose them!"

As by a lightning-flash, the shocking truth was abruptly revealed to Birrel. *Two* groups of secret agents, bitterly hostile to each other, playing a vast and deadly game against each other, were on the unsuspecting Earth!

CHAPTER IV

BIRREL FELT THE IMMINENCE of onrushing danger. Danger, not just to himself, but to all his world. For in him lay the only chance to find out about the threat to Earth before it materialized.

Who their pursurers were, who

the Irrians and Vannevan might be, and why they had come to Earth, he could not guess. But about Kara and Holmer, he was sure. Their colleague, the dead Rett, had had those pictures of Earth's most secret weapons and defenses on him. They, therefore, were the danger—and he must not lose them.

"Turn at the next side road!" he said to Holmer. "We can give them the slip in the back roads."

Holmer nodded. Birrel looked back. A pair of headlights swung steadily along a quarter-mile behind them.

"They're closer," said Kara.

Birrel looked ahead, saw the sign that marked a crossroad, and said, "Turn there!"

Next moment, he thought they were all three done for. For Holmer turned into the dark side road without slowing down at all, and the sedan careened on screaming tires and threatened to go over.

Birrel, slammed into a corner of the back seat, felt Kara bump against him. He held her with one arm and groped frantically for something to hold onto when they rolled over.

They didn't roll over. By scared reaction, Holmer spun the wheel at the right second. The sedan tottered, then thumped back onto all four wheels, its motor stalled.

Out on the main highway, a car flashed by fast.

"These cursed Earth vehicles!" said Holmer, in a shaky voice. "No gyroscopic controls, no built-in stability factor at all!"

Birrel felt like yelling, "What the devil made you think you could turn a right angle at full speed?" But he didn't. It would give him away, as Rett he mustn't know too much more about automobiles than the others did.

But for the sake of survival he had to get Holmer away from the wheel.

He said, "Let me drive it—since I saw you last I've learned to handle them pretty well."

Holmer crowded over in the front seat, holding the black box in his lap. Birrel climbed over fast, and took the wheel.

"They went past, but now they're coming back!" cried Kara. "I can hear—"

Birrel kicked the starter and then the gas-pedal, and the sedan shot up the dark asphalt country road like a frightened rabbit.

Kara was looking back, and her voice came clear over the rising whine of the motor.

"They're back there. Gaining on us—"

Birrel glanced up at the mirror and the headlights coming up fast behind. He jammed the gas-pedal

down, sending the sedan hurtling past the lighted windows of houses, the black masses of trees. The headlights came no closer.

Kara cried to Holmer, "Use the —" Again, the word that Birrel did not know.

He knew what it meant. The square box in Holmer's lap, the thing that had stricken all in the prison unconscious by its potent vibrations.

Holmer fiddled with the box. Over the roar of the motor, Birrel could not hear it come on. But he looked up hopefully at the mirror.

The headlights stayed right with them.

"No use" said Holmer. "They've got their shields on. They must have known how we did it at the prison."

He turned the thing off. Birrel realized, with a certain desperation, that it was up to him.

He had one advantage, he thought. If those pursuing were from another world, they would not be able to drive an Earth automobile as expertly as he could.

Kara said, "They could cut us down with the"—(another totally incomprehensible word)—"but they won't dare use *that* here! It would let everyone in this part of Earth know they're here!"

What weapon it was that the pursurers, the Irrians, had but might

not dare to use, Birrel could not guess. But the fear in Kara's voice was enough to make him conjure up nightmare visions of awful agencies and powers that might be loosed on them.

It decided Birrel. Better to take the risk of cracking up than let that car hang onto them. He would use his one advantage.

"Hold tight," he said, and turned sharply at the next side road.

BIRREL BEGAN A CRAZY twisting and turning on the network of back roads. He had always been a good driver. Tonight, with desperate purpose urging him, he forgot all about road-risks.

He forgot about everything except the ribbon of road under his headlights, the sharp curves that he skidded around in racing turns, the instinctive feel of what grade, what dip, what crossroads, came next. It was late and the farmhouses were dark now, sleeping people in them not dreaming of what screamed past them in the night, what flight and pursuit of folk from far worlds.

The rhythm of the racing motor got into Birrel's mind, as his tension rose higher. There was nothing but the headlights and the road and the dread of what came behind them. He was sharply startled when Kara's voice broke the

spell, speaking close to his ear.

"We lost them, long ago!" she was saying. "Rett, slow this thing before you wreck us."

Birrel eased the gas-pedal. Beside him, Holmer looked scared.

"These clumsy Earth cars—I'll never get into one again!" he said, with feeling.

They were running up a hillside, with scrub woods on either side of the road.

"Stop on the crest, and we'll listen," said Kara.

He stopped, cutting the motor and lights. They got out and looked back. In the soft summer night, the little woods-sounds, the monotonous song of peepers, were somehow shocking in their ordinariness, to Birrel. Impossible that it was just another July night in New Jersey, when beside him stood a man and woman not of Earth.

He looked up at the summer sky, decked with chains and hives of stars. From which dot in the sky had these two come? From where had those others come, those who pursued, the Irrians? "*The sky is full of worlds*," Connor had said. And the sky was full of mystery and menace...

"Yes," said Holmer. "We've lost them. But we'd better not linger here."

They got back into the car, and Birrel drove on again. Holmer

said, "We'll go back to the house. We've got to decide fast, what to do—now that Vannevan knows we're on Earth. We can stay here, and keep watching them. Or we can go home, with what we already know."

With a queer icy feeling, Birrel realized that "home" meant the world from which they had come somewhere across the abyss of space. There must be a ship, hidden somewhere, waiting for these people. If he could keep up his imposture till he reached that ship, and then get word to Connor. .

"Rett, you're going wrong, the other road is the way to the house!" Kara said suddenly.

They had just passed a cross-roads. Birrel braked the car, and with dismay realized that he had not the faintest notion where "the house" was. Yet that was something that, as Rett, he obviously should know.

He said, "I'm sorry, it's been so many weeks. You had better call out the turns for me."

Neither Kara nor Holmer seemed to find it surprising that he should not clearly remember. But as he drove on, with the girl warning him of each turn on these far-back-in country roads, Birrel wondered how long he could maintain this impossible imposture. He had never been supposed to maintain it for

long, the plan had been that Connor and his agents would be following quick and close, but that plan had been irretrievably ruined and he had to ram ahead alone and do what he could, find out what he could.

He was driving down a dark, bumpy road between untilled fields when he became aware that now Holmer and the girl were both peering more intently ahead. Birrel made out the dark loom of an unlighted farmhouse.

Was this "the house"? He dared not ask them that—as Rett, he might have forgotten the network of roads but he certainly wouldn't have forgotten this. But if he turned in, and it was the wrong place. .

Birrel thought of a stratagem. As they approached the dark house, he slowed down as though to turn in. If they protested, he could explain that he only wanted to stop and listen again.

But they didn't protest, it must be the place. Birrel turned the car right into the rutted drive, with the headlights striking past an old lilac bush to the front of a ramshackle barn.

"Cut off the lights," said Holmer, worriedly. Birrel did so, his hand shaking a little. He couldn't gamble like this forever without slipping.

THEY WENT INTO the dark house, Kara first going through the rooms and pulling down the blinds, and then carefully lighting a kerosene lamp. They had, Birrel thought, picked a hideout far off the main roads indeed, to be without power.

The place was cold, musty, with some battered old furniture that looked as though it had been here for a long time. There was no evidence at all of how many people had been living here, and there was no evidence that its occupants were aliens from a far world. It was just an old house in the country, silent and lonely.

Birrel sat down and he was glad to do so, for his feeling of desperation was increasing. So far, he'd found out little. This house was obviously only a temporary headquarters. The real base of these people was somewhere else—but where? That was what he had to find out for Connor.

He gambled once more. He said, "Haven't any of the others been here with you?"

The others. The ones who had come with them to Earth, who *must* have come with Kara and Holmer and Rett to Earth, and who must be found!

Holmer, setting down his square black box on the floor, said uneasily, "Thile was down last week.

He's afraid of the ship being discovered, he kept urging us to leave. I told him we couldn't, without you."

Kara came and sat down in front of Birrel. She said, "I know you've been through a lot, Rett. But we have to decide fast. Have you enough proof of what Vannevan's doing on Earth to take home?"

And this was it, Birrel thought. He had got by in the rush of their flight, but he could not possibly bull it out in a conference where his ignorance must betray him.

Holmer said worriedly, "I say, go! Now that the Irrians know that Ruun has taken a hand in this, that we've followed them to Earth, they'll never rest until they hunt down us *and* the ship. You know what Vannevan is like! I say, go with what we've found—right now."

"It all depends," the girl said quickly, "on what Rett has learned. Rett—"

She never finished. At that moment, quite without warning, something like an enormous hand struck Birrel and knocked him in perfect silence to the floor.

He did not lose consciousness. He was able to see the others fall too, stricken by that same silent power. Only he could see from their horrified eyes that they knew

what the power was, while he did not. He tried with desperate urgency to move but every nerve was paralyzed, and he could only lie there and watch.

The door of the room opened. Two men came in, moving fast, dark ordinary men in ordinary clothes. Each one carried in his hand a thick, fluted metal cylinder. The cylinders must generate the paralyzing force which had worked effectively from outside the house, Birrel thought.

A third man followed them.

He was no taller than the others, but he was wider in the shoulders, a powerful easy-moving man. His face was the face of a man born to command, dedicated to it, living for and by it—a man to whom life without personal and immediate power over everything in sight would be intolerable. Just now he had it, and he was happy.

Holmer spoke, but his stiff lips could make only a terrible whisper.

"Irrians—Vannevan!"

CHAPTER V

THERE WERE SIX PEOPLE in the living-room of the old New Jersey farmhouse, and only one of them was an Earthman.

It seemed a madly impossible thing, to Birrel. The year was nineteen-fifty-seven and it was twenty-

five minutes to midnight on the eighth of July, and this couldn't be happening but it was.

"You were easy, easy," Vannevan was saying. "Did you think I *wanted* to overtake you out there on the road? All I wanted was to get close enough to pop a tracer on the back of your vehicle, and then follow you."

He was a very happy man, Vannevan. He had outwitted and beaten his enemies, and he was enjoying that part of it more than the actual capture.

He strode up and down on the old, faded carpet, but he was careful not to get in front of Birrel and Kara and Holmer.

The three sat in chairs and across the room stood Vannevan's two men. Each of them held one of the fluted metal cylinders, and each cylinder was pointing toward the three prisoners, reminding them how quickly they could be paralyzed again, or killed.

The incongruity of it gave Birrel a crazy desire to laugh. The musty old farmhouse, the smoky kerosene lamp, the ticking cuckoo-clock on the wall—and five strangers from the stars.

He wondered what a "tracer" was. He supposed it was some sort of tiny gadget that could be shot to stick onto a moving car, and broadcast a signal that could be

read and followed. He doubted if he'd live long enough to find out if that was right.

Vannevan said to Birrel, "You killed Jull, didn't you?"

There was no amusement in his hard face now. It was cut out of cold iron, and Birrel had the feeling that Vannevan was every bit as tough as he thought he was.

"Who," said Birrel, "is Jull?"

"A man of Ir," said Vannevan. "My man. The man you trailed and killed. We found the blaster-scar in the ground."

Birrel began to understand a little. He shrugged. "If you know, why ask me?"

Vannevan came closer and his eyes had a yellow glow in their dark depths.

"You wouldn't just blast him outright. You'd shock him and search him first. Just as we're doing to you. Where are the"—(he used another unfamiliar word)—"you found on him?"

Birrel said, "I found nothing. I just blasted."

Something exploded in his face. He reeled in the chair, putting up his hands blindly, half-stunned. Then he saw Vannevan's clenched fist drawing back. Vannevan, keeping carefully to one side, let the fist go again in Birrel's face.

"You're lying," he said. "You wouldn't come all the way here

from Ruun, spying on us, and trail Jull all that way, and then just blast him. Did you pass them on to Holmer before the Earthmen caught you?"

Birrel felt blood running down his face, and he felt a hate and rage that he had never suspected he could experience. He started to get up, and the Irrians with the weapons across the room pointed their cylinders at him. He didn't want to die, any sooner than he had to. He sat down again.

"The men of Ruun are brave," said Vannevan, mockingly. "Now will you tell me—"

He stopped suddenly. An expression of interest and amazement crossed his face. He reached out his hand, toward Birrel's eyes.

Birrel recoiled—but Vannevan's hand swiped across his forehead, across his eyebrows. Then Vannevan uttered an incredulous exclamation.

"This isn't a man of Ruun at all. He's an *Earthman*!"

BIRREL REALIZED what had happened. The blow, the blood streaming down his face, had effectively ruined the careful work of Connor's make-up experts.

Before he could resist, Vannevan rubbed a handkerchief across his face. Birrel, a little dazed and half-blinded by the blood in his eyes,

struck out savagely but hit nothing.

Kara's voice reached him. "**Rett**, you can't be—" Her voice trailed away, and then it came on a different note. "But you're not Rett. He's right, you're an Earthman. Where's Rett?"

Birrel got his eyes open, and now he could see her face, and Holmer's, and the pallor of shocked surprise on both.

He felt a queer guilt. There was no reason for it, they were spies and he was a counter-spy defending his country, defending Earth, but he couldn't rid himself of the feeling.

"Yes," said Vannevan fiercely, "where is Rett? Where's the man you've been impersonating?"

Birrel looked at him and said nothing.

One of the Irrians came to Vannevan's side and spoke so rapidly that Birrel could not follow it.

Vannevan said somberly to him, "Your people—the Earth people—have this Rett, don't they? They captured him, didn't they?"

That was so obvious that there was no use denying it. "They did," said Birrel.

"And they disguised you as Rett, and published that report of a captured spy, to draw the others," Vannevan said, "Of course. Which means—they know there are **strangers** on their world."

Holmer said, with a taunt in his voice, "You don't like it, do you, Vannevan? It spoils the plans of Ir, doesn't it?"

Vannevan looked at him. "No. There will be no check at all in the plans of Ir. And when we've got what we need from Earth, our plans for *your* world will go right ahead. Be sure of that."

Birrel's mind vainly tried to grapple with the hint in that by-play. Then this was not merely a personal enmity, or a factional one? Then the world of Ir and the world of Ruun—wherever those far worlds might be—were enemies? Then the Irrians, at least, had come to Earth secretly for something they needed for conquest?

It didn't make sense! These star-strangers had already used weapons far subtler and more complex than any weapon of Earth. Why would they need to filch the arms of a less scientifically advanced planet?

"*You* can wait," said Vannevan to Birrel, with a certain contempt. He turned and looked at Holmer and Kara. "But you two are important. No word is going back to Ruun of our plans! Where is your ship hidden?"

"Where is the ship of Ir hidden?" countered Holmer.

Vannevan smiled grimly. "Where you couldn't find it. And you've tried long enough, haven't you?

This planet has a lot of wild places. Which one is your ship hidden in?"

Holmer merely laughed.

"You'll tell, one of you," promised Vannevan. He spoke to the Irrian beside him. "The man, first. Take him upstairs. He'll talk more freely and readily if she can't hear him."

The other man pointed his weapon at Holmer. Holmer, without a look at Kara or Birrel, started up the old stairway in the hall, with the Irrian close behind him.

Vannevan followed them.

Birrel looked at Kara. Her face was a stony mask. He looked at the Irrian across the room. In the yellow light of the lamp, the man's face was wrong. It was wrong because it was just a dark, average face. It didn't belong to an enemy from the stars. But the cylinder in his hand pointed levelly at Birrel and the girl.

The dusty cuckoo-clock ticked toward midnight. Strange, that it was running, Birrel thought. One of them—Kara or Holmer—must have started it out of curiosity.

He knew he was only thinking these thoughts so that his brain wouldn't crack from the insane unreality of the situation.

Birrel suddenly felt sweat on his forehead. Sounds were coming from upstairs, not loud sounds,

but thumping, gasping noises. There was a voice, and then more of the gasping sounds.

Kara started to get to her feet and the man with the fluted metal cylinder said, "Sit down."

Birrel looked at the clock. Two minutes to midnight. A cuckoo clock and a spy from the stars. Unreal. But a wild notion began to grow in his mind. .

A SHRIEK, A FADING, choking death-cry, came down the stairs. And then Vannevan's voice came down, loud with anger.

"Damn him, he's dead."

"Sit down," said the armed Irrian, again.

A half-minute to midnight. He'd have to try it, there'd never be another chance, not after Vannevan came down those stairs for another of them, for Kara first, and then for Birrel—

The cuckoo-clock said, "*Cuckoo.*"

At the sharp sound, at the little flirt of movement by the out-popping bird, the Irrian with the weapon looked up, startled.

Birrel had thought he would. He thought it unlikely that they had cuckoo-clocks out in the stars. He had waited for the moment, and as the Irrian's head turned, he sprang.

He didn't try to reach the Ir-

rian himself. He was too far off. He went for the table with the kerosene lamp on it, which was quite near. He hooked his fingers under the edge of the table and heaved it over as hard as he could. The lamp went flying. It hit the floor, splashing hot oil and flame, and the Irrian screamed. The carpet was suddenly burning around his feet and little flames blossomed like magic where the oil spattered his clothes. There was no need for Birrel to tackle him. He fled screaming into the hall, tearing off his coat and beating in panic at his legs.

The room was in darkness now except for the splashes of fire that ran over the floor and up the window curtains and in erratic streaks on the wallpaper. Birrel grabbed Kara's hand and lunged for the outer door.

"Holmer!" she cried frantically, dragging back.

"He's dead, you heard—come on!" He pulled her, with rough determination.

They banged out over the sagging porch-floor into darkness, and he ran, not toward the car but toward the brush beyond the house, the black thickets that promised protection.

He looked over his shoulder and saw the leaping red glow spreading fast inside the grimy windows. The

screams of the Irrian had sunk to a kind of groaning, and Birrel could hear Vannevan's fierce voice over it.

He kept tight hold of Kara's wrist, and now they were in the thicket, moving through saplings and brush. Then Birrel stopped.

Back there, three dark figures had come out of the house. Two of them were twined together, as though one half carried the other. The third was alone and in the lead. They stood silhouetted against the glowing windows, looking this way and that.

Birrel whispered to Kara, "Quiet. If we try to get any farther, he'll hear us."

"They will search until they find us," she whispered.

He shook his head. "That house is beginning to burn nicely. I don't think they'll stay here long."

He felt her gesture of negation. "I don't understand."

"We have a thing on Earth called a Fire Department. In the country every man is his brother's fire warden. Pretty soon the place will be swarming with trucks and volunteer firemen. Stand still and wait."

They waited.

Vannevan and the men spoke together. Finally they left the hurt one to groan and crawl in the grass, and the two of them began

to move back and forth in the brush, circling out.

A great plume of flame shot up through some air-shaft in the house and stood out gloriously above the roof.

Vannevan and his man had vanished now in the brush. Birrel held Kara's hand and sweated, and prayed for a sound.

It came. The hoarse, harsh wailing of a country siren, designed to waken every sleeping volunteer in the township.

It rose and fell on the night air, ominous and loud. Vannevan and his man hastily reappeared in the shaking red light. They picked up the hurt man and took him limping away between them. They went down the dark road. Presently, in the distance, Birrel heard a car start.

When he could not hear it any more he said, "All right, let's go."

And he took Kara away across the dark brushy fields running, stumbling, toward a future whose incredible outlines he was beginning vaguely and against his will to see.

CHAPTER VI

THEY SAT TOGETHER in a brushy hollow by a stream. Frogs chorused in the marshy spots. The stars swung overhead,

above the dark trees. Close by in the warm night an owl sang a weird fluttering song to his love, and there were crickets.

Birrel and Kara spoke of things so strange and far away that they were doubly unbelievable in this setting.

Birrel was stubborn. "I've got to take you back to Connor." He had explained to her who Connor was. "He'll study the facts and decide what to do. After all, you've got to remember that Earth is our world. It's more important to us than any other."

Kara was stubborn, too. "The threat is not against your Earth! It's against Ruun, my world. I told you —"

"But your man Rett, the real Rett—he had that probe-ray record of our most secret atomic installations on him."

"Of course he did," she said angrily. Birrel gathered that she had liked Rett, not romantically but as a good comrade in arms. She had taken the news of his death rather hard. "Why do you think he was there at all? He took that record from the Irrian. It was the proof we needed of the Irrians' activities here, so that our government back home will act before it's too late. If your people hadn't shot him, everything would have been arranged by now. As it

is, it's worse than ever."

"Look," said Birrel. "I want to believe you, Kara. I do believe you. But it's just too big a responsibility for me to take on my own shoulders. Connor —"

"Connor!" she said contemptuously. "You're afraid."

"Yes," he said. "I'd be a fool if I wasn't."

She put her head between her hands and said in a very patient voice, "I am trying to remember your side of it. Now listen to me once again. There is a star — you call it Wolf 359. It has several planets, of which five are inhabited. We, the people of Ruun—"

"Control four of the five planets," Birrel said, not without a faint edge of skepticism for the story he had already heard from her.

"Peaceably," she said. "The other three worlds allied themselves with us voluntarily. They are completely autonomous. But they are less favorably situated than Ruun and they can't support large populations, so they're relatively weak. And they wanted a strong friend, rather than a strong master — like Ir. Would *you* enjoy living under Vannevan?"

He had to admit he would not. "But are the Irrians all like him?"

"Of course not," said Kara. "But Ir, the fifth world, is ruled by oligarchs, of whom Vannevan

is one. The people of Ir may not like it — indeed, we've heard some of them don't — but they're pretty well held down."

But still, Birrel thought, both parties to this interstellar quarrel were strangers to him. And anyway, the decision was not his to make.

He said so, and she said, "But it is yours to make. Nobody else can make it. There isn't time."

She plunged on desperately, trying to make him understand. "For centuries we've fought the Irrian oligarchs to keep them from dominating the whole system. The only time we had any peace was when the oligarchs took to fighting among themselves for power at home. Because of that struggle, many years ago they finally exhausted every bit of fissionable matter on Ir. We were able to prevent them from getting any more from our federated planets, and so for a long time there has been peace. You see? We had atomic weapons, they had not. They were no longer any danger. And of course we didn't need our strong military forces any more. All we've had for decades is just enough to act as an interplanetary police force. And now —"

"And now the Irrians have stolen a march on you," Birrel said. Kara had explained the significance

of that probe-ray record, and he had to admit that it seemed to make sense. "They've decided to steal fissionable material from Earth. So they sent Vannevan and his men here to spy out our installations preparatory to raiding them. And if that doesn't constitute a threat to Earth I don't know what does."

"But the weapons they make won't be used against you!" she cried. "They'll be used against us, and unless we can mobilize in time we won't have a chance."

"Look," said Birrel. "Connor will see to it that our installations are so heavily guarded that no one can raid them. Then there's no threat to either of our worlds."

SHE GROANED, as though in despair at trying to deal with an idiot. "Your prison was strong and carefully guarded. Did we have trouble breaking into it? Would we have trouble breaking in anywhere? Guards consist of men and electronic devices. We can blank them both, in many different ways. So can the Irrians. Your defenses wouldn't hold."

And Birrel realized with a sinking heart that that was true.

"But we've got to fight. We've got to do what we can."

"Yes. Of course you do. And there is only one way." Her voice

was eager now, forceful, hammering home her points with relentless logic.

"Come back with us to Ruun. Tell the authorities what you know, what you have actually seen. That will be enough to make them believe and mobilize. Vannevan and his men are only the forerunners here. A small fleet must come from Ir for the actual raid. Ruun can stop them, you cannot. You understand? Your defense is out there!"

And she pointed at the glittering sky above the trees.

Birrel followed her gesture and thought, *Oh Lord, I can't! I'm scared. How far is Wolf 359? I never even heard of it.*

And then he thought, *But she's right. Connor, all our armed forces—we'd be like babies against a fleet from Ir. We have atomic weapons but we'd never have the chance to use them. It would be just as it was at the prison —*

He listened to the owl and the crickets and the gurgle of running water, and smelled the cool sweetness of the summer night and dug his fingers into the grass because he wanted to hold on to Earth and all that was familiar.

But overhead the stars glittered and shone, and there was a decision to be made.

"If you want to fight for your world and your people," said Kara

softly, "you must have courage to do what you know is right, even if it is against orders."

Yes, thought Birrel. Yes, indeed. Have courage.

Well, the whole thing had gone wrong from the start. He couldn't see that he would make it any better by delivering Kara to Connor. The chances were she couldn't be made to tell anyway where the ship from Ruun was hidden, and it would undoubtedly take off at the first hint of danger. And in any case, it seemed that the Irrians were the threat to Earth, and she didn't know where their ship was. If Kara was telling the truth, the resultant delay might be fatal to both their causes. He thought she was telling the truth.

Very quickly, before he could change his mind, he said, "It seems I have to go with you to Ruun."

"Good," she said fiercely. "Good! Then we have a chance." She jumped to her feet and tugged at him impatiently. "We've wasted too much time already. Let's go."

"Now hold on," he said. "We'll make better time if we plan ahead. Where is your ship?"

"North. In a wild place beyond a big body of water — I think it's called the Hudson's Bay."

Well, if you wanted to hide a spaceship, Birrel thought, that would be as good a place as any.

But it was the devil of a long way off.

"How did you get down here?"

"By hopper."

"By *what*?"

"Hopper. A small flier for planetary hops. It's hidden right here in the woods. We made a shelter for it as soon as we got the farmhouse and flew it in by night. Before that it was in some mountains where we first landed. Come on."

And there was no problem. No problem at all. You found the camouflaged shelter in the summer woods and you got into the neat impossible craft that was in it and watched a girl in a tan suit manipulate a couple of controls with the casual ease of a teen-ager using a record-player. Some quiet force — compressed air, Birrel thought, remembering experimental aerodyne models he had seen — lifted the hopper high and took it away, and the last red coals of a smouldering farmhouse winked in the black countryside and were gone.

By dawn they were far north and rifling with incredible speed through the sky, at a fantastic altitude. Any radarman who chanced to catch them on his screen would lose them so fast he would never believe he had seen anything. And Birrel now knew a lot more about Kara and her people than he had.

Kara's father had been a high

officer in Ruun's intelligence service in the days when, according to her, the existence of four peaceful planets hung on its efficiency. She herself, as a kind of proud inheritance, also belonged to the intelligence service, which in these later times had dwindled to a small and neglected group of people dedicated to not trusting the Irrians.

IT WAS THESE INTELLIGENCE people who had discovered the departure of the Irrian ship for Earth and deduced the reason for its going. But official Ruun had refused to be hustled into a panic. They were not going to put four planets on a full war footing, with all that implied, merely because a ship had made the voyage to another solar system. Rather, they thought, this star voyage might well be the beginning of a new era in peaceful expansion, with the Irrians finally taking a place in a civilized community of worlds. They had allowed a shipload of agents from Ruun to follow and check on the Irrians, but no more. And any future action would be determined by what documented information they brought back.

Kara's people had been forced to lose a little time while they learned the language and customs of the part of Earth they had busi-

ness in, well enough to get by. They had done this — as presumably the Irrians had too — by adapting their televisors to receive terrestrial broadcasts which they could pull in from amazing distances, and then staring at them for hours at a time with the help of a philologist and a social scientist. Then, when they came south after the Irrians, they had been able to slip quite easily into the polyglot life of New York, which is accustomed to accents and odd ways.

"There's the ship," said Kara suddenly.

She had brought the hopper down in an express-elevator plunge and was pointing at a wedge-shaped piece of barren land between two rocky arms at the base of a mountain. The light of the rising sun made a sort of dazzle in the air, but apart from that there was nothing.

"I don't see any ship," he said. "Where?"

"I forgot, you don't have the refraction-type camouflage. When you're used to it you can spot it without a scope, if you know where to look. Here." She made rapid adjustments in a small gadget like a camera view-finder. "This is tuned to our chosen vibration rate. Makes it harder for an enemy to find us."

Birrel looked into the 'scope and saw a slim silver spire standing on the flat land, its nose pointed toward the sky.

He looked out the port again and saw nothing.

"Light rays bent in a magnetic field around the ship," she said. "They'll drop it now. Watch."

She depressed a switch, activating some automatic signal system. The dazzle of sunlight vanished and the silver ship was there. She landed beside it.

She stepped out and waited for Birrel to follow. He hesitated, looking at the ship. A hatch opened and a magnetic grapple dropped down toward the hopper. Below, a much smaller hatch appeared and extruded a ladder. Once he climbed that ladder, Birrel knew, he was trapped. The ship would take off and—

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Kara said, smiling.

He set his jaw and went with her to the ladder and climbed it and passed into the ship.

It smelled like a submarine, of oil and metal and canned air. There was a man in an odd-looking coverall who stared at him and spoke to Kara. He heard Kara explaining, and in the meanwhile the lock door behind him was grinding shut and locking itself with relentless precision.

Kara said, "This is Thile. He commands the ship."

Birrel shook hands with him. He was a small lean man with very keen eyes and a hard competent jaw.

"So Holmer and Rett are both dead," he said, with grim regret. "Well, we'll make Vannevan pay for them. Help him strap in, Kara. We're taking off at once." He looked at Birrel. "If we can get back to Ruun without delay, you may be able to convince our sheeplike leaders in time. I hope so."

He hurried away somewhere forward—or up. Kara took Birrel into a small cabin where there were several padded couches, and helped him secure himself with broad webbing straps.

"Scared?"

"Not a bit."

"Liar. Don't worry about it. The first take-off is always the worst." She leaned over impulsively and kissed him, ludicrously like a mother tucking a fretful child into bed. The ship suddenly gave a great roar and a quiver, and a raucous horn began to sound. She scrambled into the couch next to his.

Birrel's heart pounded wildly and the blood in his veins turned cold and thin as water.

There was noise. A stunning, deafening crescendo of it. Then

there was a feeling of motion. He lay on the top of a rising piston that pressed him slowly and relentlessly against air compressed into a smaller and smaller space. He opened his mouth and yelled in panic fear, seeing himself crushed into a flattened pulp. The cry was lost in the bursting roar that enveloped the ship. Ages passed. And then miraculously the pressure eased and finally was gone.

Thile's voice came suddenly from a speaker in the wall. "Trouble, Kara. Radar says another ship has taken off from Earth, right behind us."

Birrel heard her quick, fierce exclamation. "So Vannevan was watching his radar for our take-off. I knew he'd never let us get back to Ruun if he could help it!"

CHAPTER VII

THEY WERE ALL in the ship's bridge now. Thile and Kara and a young man named Vray were conferring tensely with the radar-man and checking a bristling array of instruments.

Birrel was looking at space.

The ports on one side were shielded against the sun, so he couldn't see it. Earth was behind, or below them, so he couldn't see that either. All he could see was nothing, an infinity of it, without

top or bottom, front or back, beginning or end. The stars floated in it, by the millions and billions, like shoals of fiery fish gleaming red and gold and blue and green, white and violet, orange and dull crimson. They were not crowded. There was plenty of room between them. The eye was drawn farther and farther into those distances and the body unconsciously tried to follow, until the mind recoiled from the edge of some psychic calamity and screamed for solidity. Birrel spun away from the port and grabbed hold of a stanchion and stood with his eyes shut, sweating and shaking as though he had just run a race.

Kara said, "It gets you, doesn't it?"

He indicated that it did, beyond words. She nodded.

"It's no different with us. We look up at our summer skies just as you have, and dream about what it's like. We read books and we see pictures. But you can't know until you actually get out into space and see it for yourself. And I don't think you ever get over being awed. I never have."

Birrel opened his eyes again, but kept them firmly fixed on the inside of the bridge. Thile and Vray were still hanging over their instruments, looking grim.

"That ship," said Birrel. "It'll

try and catch us, I suppose. Stop us from getting word to Ruun."

"I can't imagine Vannevan letting us go without a fight." Her voice was not exactly frightened, but it had a sort of clipped tightness about it that was far from care-free.

"Can he? Catch us, I mean?"

"The Irrians are good spacemen, and their ships are about as fast as ours. But Thile is a wizard. He can outfly anything in space."

Thile heard her and looked up. He said sourly, "Thanks. But you might as well tell him the truth. Vannevan is not going to rely on speed and skill alone, but on weapons. And we're not carrying any atomic armaments. The government brains didn't think it was wise, considering that we were trespassing on a strange world and might conceivably have an accident, such as falling into a city. They're thoughtful that way."

"As an Earthman, I appreciate it," said Birrel. "You have conventional weapons, don't you? That's at least an equal footing."

"We're not used to them," Thile said. "They are. But we'll do our best. Believe me."

He glanced at Vray and nodded.

"Stand by for translation."

Birrel looked at Kara.

"That only means," she said, "that we're going faster."

"How much faster?"

"Well, just at first," she said, "about double the speed of light."

Birrel stopped trying to go along intelligently with any of it. He just let it happen.

The lights inside the ship dimmed and burned blue. There was a screeching whine that rose up and out of hearing, clawing at the nerves as it went, and then there was a moment of awful vertigo when the ship and everything in it seemed to slip and fall sideways in an insane fashion.

The open ports slid shut automatically. Just before they closed Birrel caught a glimpse through them of the stars he had been looking at only a few moments before. They shifted, streamed like burning rain, and vanished, to be replaced by squiggling lines of lights.

Then the ports were shut and there was nothing except the personal sense of disorientation to show that anything had happened.

Complacently, like one who knows he is dreaming and that therefore these strange things are not really happening and so need not be taken seriously, Birrel listened to the voices of the men, speaking technical words of no meaning to him as they went through what was apparently a routine check. Then the radarman said,

"They're right with us."

Thile grunted. "Full acceleration," he said. "Build up as fast as you can. Maybe their generators aren't as good as ours."

THE WHINING BEGAN again but on a different note. Birrel pictured himself inside an iron egg flying through space — what kind of space?—at double, triple, quadruple the speed of light. He erased the thought from his mind as quickly as he could. He said to Kara,

"Why haven't people done more star-travelling? You obviously have a workable drive."

"We haven't had the time until recently," Kara said. "The Irrians kept us too busy. Then the few exploratory trips we did make to neighboring systems were discouraging. In most cases the planets were uninhabitable, and the ones that did have life forms were pretty awful. Our government hasn't encouraged star flight. I think they're afraid of what might come flying back our way."

The ship quivered and trembled. Birrel thought he could almost feel the atoms crawling in the metal under his hand.

"Do you ever hit things?" he asked. "Like stars, I mean."

"Not very often. But I believe the results are quite spectacular.

You become a nova almost at once."

He laughed. He did not ask any more questions.

The whining levelled off at last, refusing to go any higher. A collection of needles steadied on the main control board.

Vray said, "That's it."

The radarman shook his head and said, "They're still with us."

The lines deepened in Thile's face, turning it grim and hard.

"Action stations. We'll try and get them before they get us."

Birrel said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Back in your bunk and strap in. This is liable to be rough."

He shook his head. "There must be something I can do."

"You'd only be in the way," Kara said. She was already removing a protective panel from a control-board ominously marked in red. She smiled, to take the sting out of the words. "You'll need a vac-suit. Here, Rett's will fit you."

She took a baggy-looking suit and a plastic helmet out of a locker and handed it to him. The others were putting on similar suits, leaving the helmets open. Birrel said, "Why?"

"In case we're hulled. If you hear the warning-horn, clap your helmet shut. *Fast.*"

She showed him how and then practically pushed him out of the

bridge. He shuffled back to the cabin and lay down on the bunk, feeling worse than he had at any time since the beginning of this hare-brained venture. He was scared, and he didn't mind admitting it. If he had been able to do something, anything at all, it wouldn't have been so bad. But just to lie here alone in this completely incredible ship, thinking of the completely incredible but perfectly real destruction that faced him—that was something no man ought to be asked to do.

He did it.

He was able to sense the "feel" of the ship, and from that to gauge the variations — the slight recoil and shudder as missiles presumably were launched, the greater perturbations of what could only be the near-miss blasts of the enemy weapons. It occurred to him that what these star-folk meant by "conventional weapons" were probably not at all the simple explosive types referred to by that name on Earth. The technical problems involved in launching any kind of missile at all at light-plus speeds were so far beyond him that he didn't even try to figure them. But there was no doubt that it was being done. Every leap and jar of the ship told him that unmistakably.

Even so, Birrel was not prepared

for the suddenness and violence of what happened.

There was a crash. He felt it physically and heard it, too, this time, transmitted by the ship's air. He fell upward against the straps as the gravitational axis of the ship was brutally reversed. The lights dimmed to an eerie blue and there was a horrible tortured howling of overtaxed generators. The ship rammed through into normal space with much the same effort as of a speeding car hitting a stone wall, only greatly magnified. Birrel heard the warning horn start. He clapped his helmet shut, and then inertia flung him into the recoil couch as into a slab of granite and the joints of the ship began to spring around him. Then everything was dead, generators, horn, everything. The ship was silent except for one sound, the hiss of escaping air.

STUNNED BUT STILL, incredibly, alive, Birrel unfastened the straps and floated out of the couch.

The ship was still moving, but there was no longer any gravity field to speak of. Birrel was in free fall. He floated like a great clumsy balloon out of the cabin and toward the bridge, clawing his way while the ship bent and wavered and wobbled around him, its rigid frame gone limp. As limp as his own body felt. Currents of escap-

ing air whirled papers, garments, pieces of equipment, bits of wreckage wildy around in the interior. He was in a panic lest his helmet be cracked or his suit torn.

The bridge was a shambles of buckled steel and shattered glass. The radarman was crumpled among the remains of his equipment, which had toppled and crushed him. Thile, strapped into the pilot's chair, was stirring feebly. Birrel looked frantically around for Kara.

She was strapped into a recoil chair in front of the fire-control panel. He thought at first she was dead, but when he looked closer he could see that she was breathing. There was nothing he could do for her at the moment and she was safer where she was, so he left her and went to help Thile. There was no sign of Vray at all, except for a few small red icicles formed on the edge of a jagged rift in the hull through which everything movable in the bridge had already been sucked.

Thile's voice came faintly through the helmet audio. "I told you they were better shots."

"Are you hurt?"

"Are you?"

"I don't know yet. Haven't had time."

"Nor me," said Thile. "I can stand up, so I guess I'll live." Blood was trickling from his hel-

met. He snuffled at it and made futile pawing motions at his helmet. "Well, that does it. Vannevan's won hands down." He swore, a dejected and bitter man. "Four good men dead, and all for nothing. It wasn't even a good try."

He pointed through the riven wall, to the black peaceful gulf beyond with the far stars shining in it.

"See there?"

There was a ship, matching its pace to the slow drift of the derelict. From its slim belly a much smaller craft dropped and jettied fire.

"They'll be aboard us in a few minutes."

Remembering how Vannevan had conducted his questioning at the farmhouse, Birrel could see little hope. If he and Thile and Kara were going to be at Vannevan's mercy, they might better have gone the way of Vray and the radar-man.

Unless—

"Listen," said Birrel suddenly, "Listen, there's one thing we might do." He went over to Kara and shook her until she opened her eyes. "There isn't much time, you've both got to play along with me or it won't work. It might give us an edge, to use against Vannevan. Listen—"

He spoke rapidly, forcefully, and

they listened, while the life-boat of the Irrian ship came closer, riding its fiery jet across the black gulf outside.

Thile said, "It might work—"

"It'll be dangerous," whispered Kara. "If he finds out —"

"I don't figure I have much to lose anyway," said Birrel dryly. "Hurry up!"

When Vannevan and his men came into the broken ship they found Thile and Kara clinging quietly together, apart from the Earthman Birrel, who was strapped into a recoil chair with his hands bound tightly behind him.

CHAPTER VIII

THERE WERE SIX of the Irrians, counting Vannevan. They wore vac-suits and they were all armed. Two of them went immediately to Thile and Kara and searched them for weapons, but they had none. The time for resistance was past.

Another man, on Vannevan's instructions, began to tear open the lockers that were still intact, looking for papers. The others stood guard. They handled themselves easily, experts at null gravity.

Birrel looked at Vannevan and said sourly, "Out of the frying pan into the fire. I don't know which of you is worse."

Vannevan's eyes were bright, cruel, competent and happy. Very happy. He had wiped out, and with interest, the defeat he had suffered at the farmhouse. He had crushed the Ruunites completely. For him, it was a good day.

He smiled at Birrel. "You see what happens to meddlers."

"I wouldn't call it meddling," Birrel said. "We caught a spy. It was natural to want to know who he was working for, and why."

"When you found out," Vannevan said, "why didn't you report back to your superiors? You were free. I remember distinctly that you were free."

Birrel indicated Kara with a savage movement of his chin. "She talked me out of it, damn her. With a gun."

"So," said Vannevan, and smiled, and shook his head. "But she had no weapon. I myself had seen to that."

"She had one," Birrel said bitterly. "In the hopper. She told me there was another car hidden there for emergencies, and like a fool, I believed her. Instead there was that flying-thing, and she pulled a weapon from inside it. The next thing I knew I was aboard this ship, a prisoner. They were going to take me back to Ruun whether I wanted to go or not."

Kara spoke sullenly. "His people

killed Rett. It was the least we could do."

"Listen," said Birrel, struggling angrily against the straps that held him. "I don't give a curse what quarrel you have between you. I don't care if you blow each other's worlds out of the sky. I'm an Earthman. I don't belong here. I—"

He looked around at the broken ship, at space gaping monstrously beyond the riven hull. It was not difficult for Birrel to let an expression of fear come into his face.

"I want to go back," he said.

Vannevan looked at him. "How badly?"

Birrel would not meet his eyes. He muttered, "Bad enough."

"Well," said Vannevan. "We'll see." He motioned to one of his men. "Cut him loose. Did you find anything?"

The Irrian who had been searching shook his head, and Thile said, "I could have told you. We don't keep written records."

Vannevan shrugged and said, "Let's go."

They floated gracefully through the ship, with Birrel lumbering and floundering in their midst. They passed through the airless lock and into the life-craft. In a short time they were being taken up into the belly-pod of the Irrian ship,

and a little while after that Birrel found himself a prisoner with Thile and Kara in a locked cabin.

The ship paused only long enough to finish the destruction of the derelict. Then it went into overdrive, on its way to Ir.

During the rest of the voyage, knowing full well that they were being watched, the three kept up their pretense of hostility. But Birrel came more and more to admire Thile and Kara. They were personally defeated and in a desperate situation. Their mission was a failure. Their world and way of life, which had hung on that mission, were threatened with destruction. But they clung quietly to their hope and courage and never whined—in striking contrast to Birrel himself, whose part called for constant complaint.

Birrel thought he was establishing himself sufficiently well as a frightened man who might be talked into doing almost anything for the right reward. He hoped so. Because not only his own life but the lives of Thile and Kara depended upon that, not to speak of the safety of several worlds, including his own. He was a little upset to discover that Kara's safety loomed larger in importance than anything else. He decided then that he was in love with her.

There came finally a time when

the warning rang, and the lights burned blue and the ship shuddered, and then the port unmasked.

"We're out of overdrive," said Thile. "We're there."

AN AWE FELL on Birrel as he looked out the port with them. The ship, in normal space again, was sweeping in a curved pattern toward a sun whose diamond incandescence eclipsed the stars.

Almost lost in that overpowering glare, three points of light swung far on the other side of this system. It was toward the biggest of the three that Thile and Kara were gazing.

"Ruun," whispered Kara. "If they only knew, if we could only get a message to them—"

Thile said bitterly, "What good would it do even if we *could* send a warning? Our cautious government would merely say, as they did before, 'You have no proof that the Irrians mean war, and without proof we cannot act.'"

The ship swung on in its landing-pattern and now, below, Birrel saw a planet coming up toward them.

It was a scarred world of black-and-green. He thought at first that these were land-and-water divisions, but as they went lower he saw that they were not—that the green were

fertile plains but that the ominous black areas were utterly lifeless lands, black and blasted and barren.

"That's what the oligarchs of Ir have made of their world," said Kara. "Those burned-out regions are the scars of their wars between themselves. And now, with no fissionable matter left, they must go to space for the means of destruction!"

The ship went down toward one of the wide green areas. There was a city here—a far-stretching grimness of gray, massive buildings, with a movement of hoppers and ground-cars over and through it. A spaceport lay outside the city, with the silver towers of many ships there flashing back the diamond sun.

They felt the landing. Then there was silence. They waited for Vannevan to come, but he did not. Instead, armed Irrian guards came and marched them out of the ship onto a blackened concrete apron. They stood there for a few minutes, in a chill wind.

Birrel thought, shivering, "*Not Earth, this world I stand on. Not my own world—*"

The diamond blaze of sunlight was wrong, the color of the sky was wrong, the too-light feeling of his body was strange. The silver ship behind them, the great

gray city ahead, all wrong, queer—"Remember your plan," whispered Kara.

Birrel steadied. He had a part to play, and upon how he carried it through might depend their last slender chance. He played that part now.

He gave a vivid imitation of a man who was in a panic. He looked up at the sun and cried out and shut his eyes, and then opened them again and looked wildly around him. Then, crying out in a voice edged with hysteria, he broke back toward the spaceship.

The guards grabbed him and hauled him back. He told them shrilly, "I can't stay here, I won't stay—I want to go back—"

The Irrian guards laughed at him. When a covered vehicle not unlike a light truck came speeding up, they shoved him and Kara and Thile into it and got in after them, still laughing.

As the truck sped into the city, Birrel shivered, and looked at everything in a numb, scared way.

THE CITY WAS AS GRIM as it had looked from afar. The gray, utilitarian cement building-material used universally did not make for beauty. The men and women in the streets were mostly in a drab sort of coverall garment that was not beautiful either.

Birrel saw them looking at the truck and guards as they passed, and he thought there was a sullenness in some of the watching faces. He remembered what Kara had said, that many of the Irrian people were discontented with their oligarchs' rule but were held down tightly. He thought they looked it.

The truck turned finally into a courtyard and stopped. Heavy gates were locked behind it. Birrel and the others were ordered out. He managed to get close to Kara and give her hand a reassuring touch. Then they were taken inside a building made of greenish stone, instead of cement, with ominous-looking horizontal slits in the walls in place of windows.

Inside, without a word of explanation, they were separated. Thile and Kara were marched away up a stairway while Birrel's guards took him on down a main hallway. The hall was painted a utilitarian gray and it had guards stationed at regular intervals. About halfway down there was a door with a double guard in front of it. Birrel's armed escort stopped him here, spoke to the guard, who spoke to someone inside by means of an intercom with a small video screen. Presently the door opened and Birrel was ushered inside.

Vannevan sat at one side of a big square table. A second man,

older than Vannevan and that much more experienced in the ways of those who wage war out of choice and not necessity, sat behind it. His face was a mask, his curiously opaque eyes watching Birrel narrowly as the guards were sent away.

Vannevan said, "This is our Earthman." And to Birrel he said, "This is Wolt, our Minister of Defense."

Birrel refrained from making the obvious comment. From here on he was on his own and had to be careful. Any hope of advantage he might gain by making the Irrians think he was their not unwilling tool could be lost by a single incautious word.

"I understand," said Wolt, "that the Ruunites kidnapped you and brought you into space by force."

"They did."

"A serious act. And I understand that you are quite anxious to return to your world."

Birrel said eagerly, "Can I, is there any way? I can't take this, space and stars and a world I never saw, I've got to get back—"

He saw Wolt and Vannevan watching him keenly as he babbled in pretended hysteria, and he thought they looked satisfied by what they saw.

Wolt said, "Some of our ships will be going back to Earth on a

mission. You could go back with them, if—"

"If?" prompted Birrel eagerly.

Vannevan answered. "You're a secret agent of a great Earth power. You could assist our mission."

Now Birrel's face became apprehensive, cautious. "Just how do you mean that, Vannevan? Listen, I want to go back, sure. But I'm not going to betray any secrets or help you steal plutonium or—"

Wolt's hard voice cut in. "Let's consider the situation realistically. The loss of some fissionable material will make very little difference to Earth, with its enormous resources. Isn't that so?"

Cautiously, grudgingly, Birrel said that he couldn't see that it would make much difference, no.

"Now you must accept one fact. No matter what you as an individual may or may not do, we are going to take those materials. The very life of our planet depends on it. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Now the decision that faces you is this. Will you be doing your world a greater service by denying us the information we want and thereby forcing us to take possible violent measures in carrying out our mission — or by helping us do it quietly and thus saving a great number of lives?"

"Think of the weapons we have," Vannevan said. "Think how your Earthmen are armed. You know how much chance they have of fighting us off."

Birrel thought they would have a very good chance, but he didn't say so. He frowned, and looked uneasily at the floor.

"What would you want me to do?"

"Vannevan tells me that your people are in possession of a certain probe-ray record that was taken from our man. We'd want that back."

"That's impossible," Birrel said. "The President himself couldn't get at it."

Wolt shrugged. "In that case, you would have to supply us with similar information."

There was a long silence. Then Birrel said, with just the right lack of conviction,

"No, I can't do it."

Vannevan stood up. "I think we'd better show him the cavern, Wolt. I don't believe he understands yet just how much the safety of Earth depends on him."

Wolt nodded. He rose, too, and walked to the wall. It appeared perfectly blank and solid, but under the pressure of his hand a segment of it swung in, revealing a tiny lift. The three men got in, the door closed, and the lift plunged

down.

Birrel tried to keep his excitement well hidden. His act was already paying off — apparently they were about to show him something that even the Ruunites didn't know about.

Just how he might use that knowledge to help himself and his two friends he could not figure yet. But his stretch in the OSS had taught him well. Keep your mind alert and flexible, play it by ear, and wait for the break which may come in a hundred ways and from the most unexpected sources.

The lift let them out onto a narrow platform beside a car that ran from a track through a tunnel hollowed roughly out of bed-rock underneath the city. They got into it and the car shot through stale darkness relieved by a few dim lights. It went fast.

BIRREL STOLE A GLANCE at the other two men, and decided against any precipitate action. Vannevan had something hidden in his hand, and it would be something small and nastily potent as a weapon, he was sure. He'd wait, play it along —

There was light again, sudden and bright. The car burst into it, into vast and unexpected space. For a second Birrel thought they had come back to the surface again.

Then he saw the rocky vault high overhead and the walls going away on either side and he knew it was a mammoth cavern.

The car stopped. They stepped out onto a platform.

"This way," said Wolt. "I want you to see it all."

They moved off the platform and onto a railed shelf cut out of the rocky wall. And Birrel stared in amazement.

The end of the tunnel and the shelf on which they stood were about halfway up the cavern wall. Below, and stretching away as far as he could see, rank upon rank of great metal shapes stood, some painted in dour red or gray, others naked, gleaming steel or copper. There was no one in the cavern, no sound, no movement — nothing but the brooding silence and the loom of the endless rows of enigmatic mechanisms.

Wolt and Vannevan looked down on them, with the faces of men who see a beautiful and splendid vision. And Wolt said,

"Do you know what those are?"

Birrel said, "No."

"And how should you? Your world is still in the nursery. Those are weapons — or they will be, when they are mounted in ships. Mighty weapons, that lack just one thing — the fissionable matter that must power them. The matter that

our world doesn't have. Perhaps you understand now why we must raid your atomic stockpiles?"

"But," said Birrel, staring wide-eyed at the terrifying array of giants below him, "where are your ships? You'd need hundreds —"

"We have them," Vannevan said. "All we need to put at end to the domination of Ruun forever."

He turned to Birrel with an expression of serious and friendly candor that might have fooled him if he not known Vannevan so well.

"We have no interest whatsoever in Earth as a conquest. But don't overlook the fact that now the Ruunites know how rich your planet is. They might decide to take it over, just as they've taken over every world in this system but Ir. So in helping us break Ruun's power, you're actually protecting your own world. Now what do you say?"

Birrel looked out over the silent cavern with the endless ranks of deadly machines. He pretended to be miserable, torn between doubt and longing. Finally he said,

"I've got to think it over. Give me time—"

Wolt started to speak, but Vannevan shot him a look and said easily, "Of course, take all the time you want. There will be several days before the ships are ready."

"Ships?"

"Going to Earth. I'll be going with them, of course, to lead the raid. Or I should say, ahead of them. They'll wait in space until they get my signal. You could come back with me, if you decide to help."

Again, on a note of desperation, Birrel said, "I've got to think."

They took him back to the car and through the tunnel and into the building again. There guards took him upstairs and placed him in a small square room without even slits in the wall, furnished with a bed, a table, and a chair. They locked the door and left him alone there, with nothing to do and nothing to see, and nothing even to hear but the soft blowing of air through an iron-barred duct in the ceiling.

Maximum security, and no distractions. In this place a man couldn't do anything but think.

Food was brought. The guard who brought it admitted it was now night outside, but he refused to say anything about Kara and Thile, where they were or if they were still alive.

Birrel ate. A little after that the lights went off. He groped his way to the bed and lay down, trying to see a way out, a way to help Thile and Kara and stop the evil that was about to be done, and seeing only darkness.

Eventually, without meaning to,

he fell asleep.

He was wakened by a sound. It was a very slight sound, and it took him a minute to identify it as the clink and creak of an iron grating being moved. By that time it was too late.

Somebody was already in the dark room, and before Birrel could call out a man's body was on top of him and strong hands were fastening on his throat.

CHAPTER IX

BIRREL HAD BEEN CLOSE to death before, but never closer. Those hands clamped down, shutting off voice and breath, and the weight of a powerful body bore on him, holding him. He heard quick harsh breathing, and then the booming of his own blood in his ears drowned it out. He clawed at the wrists that would not be moved, and felt the first cold edge of darkness sliding over him.

Then memory circuits clicked over — circuits long unused, but needing only the right stimulus to activate them.

Birrel put his two clenched fists together and rammed them upward with the desperate strength of an animal that knows it has to shake itself loose or die. The fists hit something and there was a noise in the dark above him. The hands on

his throat loosened a little and he thrashed his arms up and back at the same time he got what purchase he could with his feet and heaved.

The hands let go. The body floundered on him, not wanting to be thrown off. He pounded at it, wildly, viciously, gasping air into his lungs. He felt hair under his fingers. He grabbed a fistful of it and hauled it sideways. Someone whimpered and cursed, not making much noise about it. He hauled and heaved and the body rolled off him and thumped onto the floor. Instantly, Birrel threw himself on top of it.

And now it was his turn.

He dug his knee into a yielding belly and heard the breath go out. Fists flailed at his face but he kept his head pulled in between his hunched-up shoulders. He pawed in the dark and found an ear, and then another one, and he held onto them like handles and beat the skull between them up and down on the floor.

"Who is it?" he snarled. "Vannevan? No, he doesn't like his odds this even. But he sent you, didn't he?"

A hoarse, half-articulate "*No!*" came from the man pinned beneath him.

Birrel paused. "The devil he didn't."

"The devil he did. I'd kill that murdering bastard too, if I could get my hands on him." The man squirmed and sobbed for breath. "Anyway, why would Vannevan want to kill you? You're going to help him."

"How do you know?" asked Birrel, his eyes narrowing in the dark.

"The whole underground knows it. You're helping him get fissionables from your world. Why do you think I'm here? To keep you from doing it!"

He erupted into sudden action, catching Birrel off guard as he grappled with this new concept of an Irrian underground opposed to Vannevan. It wasn't too surprising, remembering those sullen faces in the streets. But then they were rolling over, clawing and pounding at each other. Now, though, Birrel's movements were chiefly defensive.

"Hold it," he panted. "Hold it! I've got an idea that we're on the same side."

The man laughed hoarsely and went on hunting for his throat.

"All right," said Birrel. "We'll play it your way."

He gave the man a slashing blow with the edge of his hand, guessing at the distance. It hit a little low on the shoulder, but it jarred him enough to slow him down. Birrel

moved quickly. In a second he had his forearm under the man's chin, in a strangle-hold. He applied pressure, and the man became quiet.

He let up. "Now will you listen?"

The man whispered, "Yes."

"There's an underground movement here, against Vannevan and Wolt and the other oligarchs?"

"Against war. We're sick of it. You must have seen what it's done to our world. So we organized ourselves when this plan to steal fissionables from another solar system came up." He struggled against Birrel's grip. "Today we heard Vannevan had brought back an Earthman who was going to help —"

"Relax," said Birrel. "I'm not going to help Vannevan do anything." He explained rapidly. "I was stalling for time, waiting for a chance to make a break. Get me out of here, and I'll prove it."

The man remained unconvinced.

IMPATIENTLY, Birrel hauled him to his feet. "Two friends of mine, Ruunites, are somewhere in this building. If you could get to me, you can get to them. I want them freed. And I want to talk to the leaders of your underground. Between us I think we might have a chance to stop Vannevan and his party for good. Anyway, what have you got to lose? If your people

have me, I can't help Vannevan."

The man said, grudgingly, "Well, all right. I can get to your friends if you really want them freed. I helped build this place." He stepped away from Birrel, rubbing his throat. "Take off your shoes and any metal you have on you."

Birrel did as he was told.

"Now reach up toward the grating. You'll find a knotted rope. Be as quiet as you can."

Birrel climbed the rope, to a place where the duct became level enough to crawl in. He heard the man replace the grating behind them. Then he joined him, and they began a slow mole-like journey through the maze of air-ducts that supplied these inner cells of the Ministry's private prison.

The man found his way quite easily. At every intersection of the ducts luminous code-numbers glowed — "To help us when we make repairs," the man whispered, and laughed. "We use the ducts all the time for spying. I suppose tonight will finish their usefulness, but we'll find some other way."

The underground had known where Thile and Kara were prisoned almost as soon as they had been put there. Twice the knotted rope was let down and twice gratings were removed and then replaced. Birrel went down after Kara himself and took a second or two

to hold her in his arms before he lifted her into the duct.

Some time later, he had no idea how long, they had worked their way down below the level of the building and into a dry conduit that their guide said was left over from an earlier day, before the city was rebuilt. The conduit took them for some distance, and then they climbed a flight of wooden stairs into a cellar, and from there went up into the main room of a modest house, where half a dozen active and hard-faced men sat waiting.

They sprang up when Birrel and the others came in, two or three of them pulling weapons. There was a period of heated conversation, and then one of the men shouted for order and got it.

"Now then," he said, "let's hear about it. You first."

He listened, and the others listened, and all the time they watched Birrel with hatred and distrust.

Impatiently, before the man was through telling why he had not killed the Earthman, Birrel broke in on him to speak to Thile and Kara.

"They showed me something today," he said. "Vannevan and Wolt. A cavern full of armaments—enough to blow Ruun out of the sky as soon as they get the fissionable material they need."

Thile said, "We had an idea

there was such a place, but we could never pin it down."

"Neither could we," said the man who seemed to be the leader of the group. He looked hard at Birrel. "It's a mighty well-kept secret."

"There's a direct way into it from Wolt's office," Birrel said, and described it. "Now listen. If we can get away, get word to Ruun—"

"If you're thinking of ships, it's impossible. They're too well guarded on the ground, and the batteries would blow you apart before you could clear the atmosphere."

"Well, then," said Birrel, "is there any way to send a message? Can you communicate from world to world?"

"Quite easily," said Thile. "But there it comes down to the same old thing. Proof."

"For God's sake," said Birrel, "how much proof do they need?"

"Quite a bit, to get them to act in time. I assume that's what you have in mind, isn't it? Blast the cavern and destroy the armaments?"

"I want to stop that fleet from taking off for Earth. If he hasn't any way to use fissionable matter, Vannevan may not be in such a rush to get it."

The other men were listening now with intense interest. They

seemed to have forgotten a lot of their distrust in the excitement of learning about the cavern. The leader, who said his name was Shannock, said fiercely,

"Those armaments have taken years of work and a fortune in money, taxed out of our pockets. They've kept us poor, when we might have been building up trade and business on a peaceful world. If they were wiped out, the war party would go with them."

Thile said wistfully, "It's a beautiful thought. But by the time our cautious leaders on Ruun have assured themselves that they're not making a mistake, it'll be far too late."

"There must be some way," Birrel said, striding around in an agony of frustration. "Some way. Some — listen, can you transmit visually, from world to world? Could you send a picture to Ruun?"

"Of course," said Shannock, rather shocked at his ignorance. "The interplanetary automatic relay system has been working ever since we learned how to build spaceships."

Then a queer look came over his face.

"You mean to transmit right from the cavern?"

"That would be proof enough, wouldn't it?" Birrel demanded.

"If we showed them the actual cavern, down to the actual armaments?"

LOOKING A LITTLE STUN-
ned, Thile said it ought to be proof enough for anyone. "There's just one question. How are you going to do it?"

"Technically, can it really be done?"

"With a special type of transmitter, yes."

Birrel looked at the men of the underground. "If you'll help, we ought to be able to make a pretty good try. How many men can you muster in a hurry—armed?"

"About twenty," Shannock said. "Besides us."

"And can you get portable equipments?"

"Easy. We can get into the Ministry building, too, by a way we know. But from then on we'll have to fight. Likely some of us won't make it."

"Likely," Birrel admitted, thinking privately that probably none of them would make it all the way. "But since we're all due for the gallows one way or another, this looks like our only chance to make Wolt and Vannevan sweat. Want to try it?"

"Give me half an hour," said Shannock. His eyes blazed with a feral light.

Birrel waited. It was a little less than a half hour and it seemed like no time at all because he spent it talking to Kara, and the things he wanted to say to her would have taken hours. Perhaps years. When finally, armed now and accompanied by twenty-seven determined men of the underground, he and Thile started back through the conduit, Kara went with them. There was no safe place to leave her, and in any case Kara was a soldier, share and share alike. She carried a weapon and walked beside Birrel, and after a while it didn't seem strange to him that she should do so, but rather as it should be.

This time they did not enter the duct system. They came through a drainage pit into an unused cellar, and from there directly into the main hall of the Ministry.

It was past midnight and the building was quiet. The guards stood at their posts, but the eruption of armed men into the hall came so suddenly that they had only time for a few scattered shots before they were dropped. Shouts and sounds of alarm and running feet came from other parts of the building. Leaving one man on the floor of the hall, the attacking party rushed into Wolt's office and barred the door.

"Hold it," Birrel panted, "while

I find the right stone."

He pawed frantically at the wall, trying to remember exactly where Wolt had placed his hand. Outside there was a tramping of feet and a growing clamor of voices. "Can't you find it?" Thile said.

Shannock ordered his men back from the door. They grouped themselves behind Birrel with the men who carried the portable transmitter in their center. "You better find it," Shannock said, "or—"

His words were drowned in a roaring crash as the door was blown in. Weapons began to hiss and whine. "Hold them, hold them," Birrel begged. "Here it is—"

The stone shifted under his fingers. The concealed door swung open. Birrel pushed Kara through it and then the men with the transmitter. They packed into the small lift and shot down, still firing as the automatic door slammed shut. They had lost four more in the office.

"There's no guard in the cavern itself, they didn't want too many knowing about it," Birrel said. "But they'll soon be after us from this end."

They wrecked the lift door as well as they could, hoping to cripple it, and then loaded themselves into the car and raced away down the dark tunnel.

"They'll come after us, yes, but

it'll take them a little time to walk," said Shannock.

THE CAR RUSHED OUT of the dark and into the cavern, stopping by the lighted platform. And in this great space of looming, silent, ugly metal shapes, their voices and the noises they made seemed loud.

Shannock rattled out orders. "Set up your transmitter on the shelf here. Wreck that car. Then we'd better split our forces. Half here to hold the tunnel, half down below in case they come in by some other way."

Thile and Kara stayed with the technicians. They were going to have to do the talking. Birrel stayed at the tunnel mouth, with Shannock's lieutenant and half the men. Shannock and the rest of the men climbed down a spiral steel stair that dropped dizzily from the shelf to the cavern floor.

They had collected extra weapons from their own fallen and from guards they had killed in the building, and with these they crouched down behind the barrier of the wrecked car.

Birrel watched the technicians out on the shelf. He had gathered that they had ways of surmounting what would have been insurmountable difficulties on Earth, using types of impluses and rectifiers and

carrier-beams unknown there. The equipment did not particularly resemble television equipment as he knew it. Anyway, the technicians seemed to know what they were doing. He hoped they did. It would be a pity to go to all this trouble for nothing.

He saw Thile, and then Kara, making animated gestures as they talked into the transmitter. They were, apparently, going to have time at least to get the message on its way. Then, with terrifying unexpectedness, the voice of God seemed to speak from the air, deafening them.

"Lay down your arms!" it said. "Surrender—you are surrounded on all sides—"

"Amplifiers," said Birrel. "They must have needed them to order things done, in a place this size. Look out, now. They'll rush us any minute—"

And they did, coming out of the dark tunnel in a fury of flashing beams from their weapons.

From behind the wrecked car someone threw an energy-grenade and then another. The results were a little too good. The whole roof of the tunnel fell in, effectively blocking it to the enemy, but also sealing off any possibility of fighting their way back out through it.

Birrel looked around. Thile and Kara and the technicians were still

sticking to their task. Down below, on the cavern floor, Shannock had driven back an attack, but from up here Birrel could see the men hiding among the looming machines and knew how badly Shannock was outnumbered.

He flung himself down the spiral stair, and the others followed. The loudspeakers roared monotonously overhead, ordering them to surrender. Birrel took up a position behind a huge looming metal bulk and then looked up at the shelf. Thile, Kara and the technicians had disappeared. A second later he saw them coming at breakneck speed down the stair, and in almost the same second something exploded with a blinding flash on the shelf and the transmitter vanished.

"Surrender," said the amplifiers. "We will grant you a fair trial if you do, but if you do not you will be killed to the last one. Surrender—"

Thile and Kara joined Birrel behind his metal bulwark, panting.

"Did you get through?" he cried.

"We don't know. There wasn't time to receive acknowledgement."

"Here they come!" yelled Shannock.

AND THEY CAME, slipping among the looming shapes of potential destruction, firing, killing, being killed, being for the second

time driven back.

And now for a moment the amplifiers fell silent and another voice spoke close at hand. Vannevan's voice.

"Count your dead. You can't replace them, but we can. How long can you hold out?"

"As long as there's one of us left!" Shannock shouted back.

"That won't be long, will it? Don't be a fool, man. Surrender."

Birrel answered him. "You'll be the one to surrender, when the ships come from Ruun."

Vannevan laughed. "The Earthman. You still think the Ruunites will fight, eh? They won't."

They attacked again, and were again fought off—or rather, Birrel thought, they withdrew, content to hack away at their opponents' numbers without exposing themselves any more than they had to.

The amplifiers spoke again. But suddenly the voice had a different tone, and it did not talk about surrender.

"A message has just been received from Ruun. Ruunite ships will position over this target in one hour and destroy it. All persons are warned to get clear of the area at once. I report that message. Ruunite ships will position—"

Pandemonium broke out in the rebel ranks.

"You hear that, Vannevan?" Bir-

rel shouted. "You're through."

Vannevan did not answer.

The amplifiers fell silent. Birrel looked at Thile, and then at Shannock, who said,

"They're not going away."

"Vannevan," said the amplifiers, "this is Wolt. I am leaving as of now and I advise you to do so. There's no virtue like knowing when it's time to run."

Still there was no sound or sign from Vannevan.

The amplifiers were silent. In the distance were noises made by people going away.

One of the men, impatient, sprang up and into the open aisle between the machines. "Hell," he said, "they must have gone. We'd better—"

He died between words, and suddenly from where they had crept close seven or eight men sprang out and rushed, firing. Vannevan led them. There would be no peace, no surrender, no flight for Vannevan.

He saw Birrel with Thile and Kara and he smiled and flung his weapon up, and Birrel shot him just before his finger touched the firing-stud.

Those of the seven or eight who were still alive threw their weapons down.

Shannock said, "I guess we can go now."

They followed the captive soldiers to the far entrance of the cavern, leaving Vannevan where he had fallen among the machines.

An hour later, Birrel stood with the others in the forefront of a close-packed crowd outside the city, and watched the great Ruunite ships position over a particular spot. Mighty lightnings crashed downward from their bellies. Smoke and dust and shattered rock rose in a vast cloud, and settled again, and there was a huge gaping hole in the ground, and still the lightnings pounded at it until there was nothing left of the cavern or anything it had contained.

Shannock and his men cheered mightily. The bulk of the Irrian crowd watched silently, not used yet to the idea of peace.

Birrel, oddly enough, was not thinking of Ruun or Ir, but of Earth.

CHAPTER X

THE SHIP SWEEPED IN toward the night side of Earth in a great curve, and first of all Earthmen that had ever lived, Birrel felt the sharp, nostalgic emotion of coming back to the world that would always be "the" world.

He was in the bridge with Thile and Kara. Kara was very silent, looking at the shadowed planet-

face ahead, not looking at Birrel at all. But Thile was busy, and vocal about it.

"It's hard enough to make a landing on a strange planet," he said. "But to have to do it secretly, without being seen—well, I'm glad this will be the last time."

The last time, Birrel thought. The last ship that would come from the stars to Earth—at least, for a long, long time. He didn't like that thought. He had argued against it, back there at the other system, at Ruun.

The men who governed Ruun were wise and well-meaning men—but obstinate. They had welcomed Birrel. They had been grateful to him. They had agreed to return him to his own world. But on one thing, they were adamant. There would be no sudden opening up of the starways, no open contact between Ruun and Earth.

Birrel, his head full of visions of a sudden leap into the stars by the men of Earth, had pleaded. But in vain.

"Your world Earth is not ready," had said the leader of the Council of Ruun. "It is not even one world, yet. When it has become one—when it has forgotten the folly of wars and weapons—then we will not need to come to you. You will come to us."

He had softened that final re-

fusal by an offer. "But you, who have done much for us, can stay here at Ruun if you wish."

"I can't," Birrel had said heavily. "I'm an agent, with a mission. If I didn't go back, those who sent me would never know what happened—they'd live in perpetual apprehension of attack from outside. I have to return with my report."

"Then you will be taken. And after that, no more of our ships will go there."

And now this last ship from outside was quietly coming down toward the nighted face of Earth, and Kara still was silent, and there was a sickness in Birrel's heart.

Thile, by the control-panel, told the helmsman, "Now softly, softly, are you trying to wake the whole damned continent?—softly—*ah!*"

They had landed.

Thile and Kara went down the ladder in the darkness, with Birrel. They stood with him by the loom of the ship.

The tall trees around them were black and vague, but the smell of pine was on the keen air, and the smells, the sounds, the feel of everything was subtly right again.

"We landed a lot farther south than last time, so you can soon find a road and people," said Thile. "Well, lad—"

He shook hands with Birrel, and

then he turned and shook hands with Kara, and kissed her, and said, "You're a bloody fool but I'd do the same thing," and turned and started back up the ladder.

Birrel said, finally, "Kara—"

"Yes," she said. "I'm staying."

He took her in his arms and could only speak her name again, and then she said, "We have to stand clear, before the ship takes off."

"I can't let you do this!" he cried. "It's why I wouldn't ask you to do it. No ship will come again, and you'll weary of it here, and—"

"Yes, yes," she said, as one might quiet a troubled child, "I know all that. But right now, we must get clear of the ship."

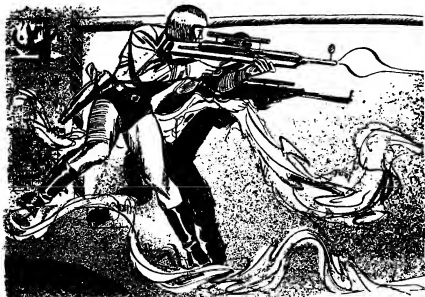
Minutes later, from a ridge a thousand yards away, they heard a boom of thunder and saw a quickly-muffled blast of flame, and then glimpsed the great silver bulk riding skyward, vanishing almost at once.

Birrel, holding Kara, looked up with her into the starry sky and saw the flying shadow against the stars, that was there for an instant and then was not there at all.

He wondered if, in the years ahead, she would look more and more with memory and longing at that starry sky. He hoped, he prayed, that she would not.



"Remember, men, no violence — unless of course they make some hostile moves!"



Kill Me If You Can!

by

S. M. Jenneshaw

Every five years the Autarch in power was murdered. Bartol knew this was why he had been picked as a stand-in for the reigning tyrant!

BARTOL STOOD on the balcony of the Grand Palace and waved, smilingly, at the throngs of people below. He couldn't help it; he struggled silently against the implanted hypnotic commands, but it did no good. He waved and smiled. And



the crowd cheered automatically for their Autarch.

And then the energy bolt slammed against the metaglass window that separated him from the cheering crowds. It only took a fraction of a second for the beam to burn through, but in that fraction of a second, the automatic protection devices took over.

Bartol dropped as the floor beneath him dissolved, plummeting him into a tubular chute that slanted back into the Grand Palace. The beam sizzled hotly above his head, filling the balcony with blue-white light, and then Bartol was

in darkness.

He was sliding down the polished metal of the chute, dropping and curving away from the balcony floor. Then, quite suddenly, a light appeared ahead of him, and he slid out of the tube onto a polished floor.

The Commander was standing nearby. A half smile played over his hard, thin, gray face. "You look very undignified for the Autarch of Apollyon. Get up."

But I'm not the Autarch! Bartol thought. *I'm just plain Rad Bartol!*

But he couldn't speak the words.

The hypnotic injunction in his mind prevented him from ever denying that he was the Autarch or even acting as though he were not.

The Commander knew who he was, of course. As Bartol stood up and straightened his gaudy uniform, the Commander said: "So far, we've fooled them. The Autarch will reward you handsomely for this, Bartol. You've done well." He waved at a nearby screen. "The attack has stopped already. We haven't spotted the Assassin yet—but we will eventually.

"Now, if you will excuse me for a moment—" there was deep sarcasm in his voice—"I will check the progress of the search."

Bartol stood there in his gaudy red-and-gold uniform, waiting for further orders from the Commander, trying to break the bonds that held his mind.

It had been nine days ago that Bartol had been arrested—secretly. The android robots of the Peace Administration had come to his apartment in the middle of the night and taken him into custody. He was only a common citizen of Apollyon, and had done nothing—at least, nothing that he could remember.

But instead of being taken before an ordinary Peace Administrator, he had been taken before the Peace Commander himself.

The blank-faced robots had held him, gently, but firmly in their rubbery hands, while the Commander had looked him over.

"Almost perfect," he had said at last.

"What am I accused of?" Bartol asked. "I demand to know the charges!"

For an instant, the Commander's face had blazed with anger. "*Demand?* What right has an arrested man to demand anything? As a citizen of Apollyon, it is your duty to submit to authority." Then his face softened. "But, come, citizen Bartol; relax. There are no charges."

"Then why—"

"No questions. You will learn."

HE HAD LEARNED, all right. The Commander had selected him as a double for the Autarch himself! Every citizen of the planet Apollyon had his mental and physical characteristics on file in the Master Records of the Grand Palace. To select a double for the Autarch, it was only necessary to feed the physical characteristics of Apollyon's absolute ruler into Master Records. The computer compared his total appearance with everyone else on the planet and had come up with the one man who most closely resembled him.

Rad Bartol.

Bartol had asked: "But why is this necessary? Why not use an android double?"

Feeling in a somewhat expansive mood, the Commander explained. "Because there are instruments which can tell the radiation of a human brain from the coarser vibrations of a metal-colloid brain. No robot could pass; you can.

"Now, I don't want you to feel that we are sacrificing you, so to speak. Every effort will be made to save your life. But we feel that it is better for the Benevolent Society of Assassins to nail you than for them to nail the Autarch. Don't you agree?"

Bartol most definitely did not; he had no more intention of dying for the tyrant dictator of Apollyon than he had of running away. But he smiled and said: "It would be a citizen's greatest privilege."

"You may wonder," the Commander had continued, "why we take such precautions against the Benevolent Society of Assassins. It is, after all, their sworn duty to attempt to assassinate the Autarch every five years. It is the democratic way of doing things, in order to change Autarchs.

"However, this time we are taking extra precautions because it is rumored that the Galactic League is secretly aiding the Society. They wish to inaugurate the Free Planet

of Apollyon into their stupid League.

"They are, of course, too cowardly and chicken-hearted to attempt to do so by force—the warrior's way. So, they are attempting to do so by infiltrating our planet with spies and saboteurs. And this time, we have reason to believe they are behind the BSA."

Bartol had listened silently. The Commander was handing out the same line of propaganda that had been handed out by Autarchs and their cohorts for fifty years. It was nothing new.

"Now, of course," the Commander explained, "you must submit to hypnotic treatment; this must be done perfectly."

The hypnosis and the slight surgery that had made Bartol into an almost perfect replica of the Autarch of Apollyon had taken nine days.

And on the ninth day, he had made the balcony speech in which he had formally accepted the challenge of the BSA. One attempt had already been made on his life.

The rules of the Benevolent Society of Assassins were strict. One man and one man only was permitted to attempt the assassination of the Autarch. If he succeeded, he became Autarch. If he did not—he died.

Success depended partly on the loyalty of the Peace Administration. If its Commander were inefficient, weak, or disloyal, the Autarch might die. But an Autarch always killed the old Commander, so there was no chance of disloyalty. But inefficiency, stupidity, and weakness were another matter.

The first attempt on his life had failed. But there would be more. Bartol stood there, resplendent in his uniform, while the Commander watched the screens.

There were about a dozen androids in the room, moving here and there, dispatching orders as the Commander gave them.

Finally, the Commander turned. His face looked quite calm. "The BSA androids have started their attack on the Palace. My own androids are holding them off so far, of course, but that is only part of the diversion. The real, human assassin may get into the Palace by trickery. After that, it will be up to you."

He walked over to an arms cabinet. "Your personal equipment is here. Force-field belt, cutter beam—everything. And may I say—good luck."

A moment later, Bartol was seated in the private citadel of the Autarch himself, waiting for a murderer to come after him.

He rubbed his temples, trying to think. There was something he was supposed to do. What? It kept nagging at the corner of his mind, but it wouldn't come out into the open. Damn the Commander and his hypnotic compulsions!

What was it he kept trying to remember? Something he *must* remember! It was something about the Galactic League—was it something the Commander had told him?

The Galactic League was made up of some of the most powerful governments in the Galaxy. Their sole law, throughout the Galaxy, was that any planet could have the kind of government it wanted, except a government imposed by force.

And yet, the League never enforced that law—at least not by using space battleships and atomic bombs. They could send directives and remonstrances, but the Autarchs of Apollyon had been ignoring those for fifty years, and would go right on doing so.

BARTOL SHOOK his head again. He couldn't remember what was so important about the League. Probably some order that the Commander had given him which would become operative at a crucial moment. It was more deeply buried in his subconscious

than the other orders.

The little speaker imbedded in his ear crackled. "Autarch! There's a disturbance on the fifth level! The assassin has entered the Palace!" It was the Commander's voice.

Suddenly, something clicked in Bartol's mind. He glanced down at his bright uniform and then looked at the plain gray of the android guards.

"You! Guard! Strip off that uniform! Quickly!"

Automatically, the android robot obeyed. At the same time, Bartol took off his own clothing. He changed with the guard and re-armed himself.

"Neither of you know where I am going. You will forget seeing me leave."

They nodded. He was the Autarch, as far as they knew; they would obey every order.

Quietly, he walked over to the heavy door that guarded the citadel, opened it, and stepped out into the corridor.

The assassin was on the fifth level. Seven levels above him! The citadel was buried deep beneath the surface.

"We have two semiportable blasters aimed at him," said the voice in Bartol's ear. "We—wait! Too late! He burned his way through the wall! Get that gun

around to the other hall! Cut him off!"

The Commander's voice kept on. In his excitement, he had forgotten that Bartol could still hear him.

Bartol listened for a moment smiling. His job was to get his enemy before that enemy killed him. He was *not* going to wait in the citadel to be killed.

Faintly, he could feel the vibration of heavy beam rifles as they fired at the fast-moving assassin.

"He's wearing a force shield!" the Commander said. "But what a force shield! Hand guns have no effect, and even a beam-rifle doesn't bother him!"

Bartol kept listening, but he started doing some fast moving himself. First, to the elevator. The elevator was locked, but Bartol burned the door open, wondering whether the car was above or below him. It was below, just as he had expected. One flash of his cutter beam, and the cables parted. There was a faint crash from far below as the automatic brakes grabbed, holding the car in place.

He still had to move fast. There was death waiting for him, and it might yet overtake him. If only the Commander kept busy with the assassin!

He listened. The Commander was still in his citadel, trying to

stop the BSA killer. Only heavy-duty guns would knock the assassin out, and they were clumsy and hard to move. The BSA man had to take a roundabout route, but he was working his way steadily toward the citadel of the Autarch, where an android in a gaudy uniform was waiting for him.

The assassin charged through a group of androids armed with handguns. He bowled them over and kept on running. Bartol wished he could follow the action with a vision screen, as the Commander was.

As he listened, Bartol was running down the corridor toward a second elevator. He burned open the door. This time the car was above him. He leaned into the shaft and fired a beam upwards. There was a flare and a grinding crash as the second elevator was destroyed.

Then he stepped into a nearby closet and carefully burned a hole in the floor. The heat was intense in the little room, but his own body shield protected him.

As soon as the hole in the floor was big enough, Bartol dropped through it to the level below. There was no one in the room.

He smiled grimly to himself as he ran down another corridor. There were only a few human beings in the Palace; all the others were androids. One of those humans was

trying to kill him, the others didn't care whether he died or not, so long as his objective was achieved.

At the end of the corridor, he came abruptly on two android guards. One of them stopped, then the other. There was a look of confusion on their faces. The first one said: "It is forbidden to have two assassins. And yet, you are human. You—"

Bartol burned them both down before they could go any further. He didn't want them spreading the alarm any sooner than necessary..

HE RAN ON, still listening to the buzzing in his ear. The two dead androids hadn't recognized his face as that of the Autarch, but they'd known there was something wrong.

The earpiece was still giving orders.

"He's over the Autarch's citadel! That doesn't give us much time. Autarch! Get out of that room! He's burning a hole through the roof!"

He was addressing Bartol, of course, but Bartol kept moving. The Commander didn't know that his phony Autarch had already left the citadel.

Bartol dodged into a bathroom. No android would be in there—they didn't need to. He burned another hole in the floor, dropped

through it into another bathroom. Again he burned through the floor.

"Autarch! Get out of that room! Leave the citadel immediately! It's your only chance!"

I knew that several minutes ago, Bartoi thought.

He only had seconds now.

The assassin blasted his way into the citadel and cut down both the guards. Then he blasted the figure in the gaudy uniform.

"That wasn't Bart—uh—the Autarch!" the Commander's voice came.

Damn right it wasn't! Bartol thought. He sprinted down a stairway. In the lower sublevels of the Palace, the lighting was widely spaced. Here were the storage levels, and the power supplies. He wanted to stay away from the power rooms; they would be heavily guarded.

"Autarch! Where are you! Answer! Where are you! The assassin knows that wasn't you! He's heading downward! Where are you?"

He's getting panicky, Bartol thought with grim amusement. *He knows I wouldn't dare answer. The assassin can tap these communications.*

The assassin, whoever he was, must have weapons of tremendous power to be able to burn his way into the Autarch's citadel so easily. He could move downward from

floor to floor a lot more rapidly that Bartol could.

Bartol knew exactly where he was going—if only he could get there in time!

He ran through the dimly lit halls which were piled high with crates and boxes. At last he came to a wall which looked like any other wall—but Bartol knew it was different.

"Autarch!" the ear speaker crackled. "What are you doing down there? Why are you in the storage compartments?"

"I'm hiding," snapped Bartol. *He knows where I am now. I'll have to work fast.*

He pressed his thumb against a hidden niche in the wall. A tiny device recorded his thumbprint, checked it against previous patterns, and then clicked. A panel slid aside. Within it was a curiously shaped helmet.

Bartol could hear the pounding of android feet all around him. Nearby, a wall started to smoke. He slammed the helmet on his head, locked the chinpiece into place, and activated the mechanism within the dome.

"Where are you? What was that helmet? The assassin is coming down!"

Evidently, the now-panicky Commander was watching him in the vision screens. He wouldn't see

anything now; Bartol was invisible to infrabeams.

Unfortunately, he was still visible to normal vision. The nearby wall cascaded outward with a splash of molten metal, and an android stepped through, firing a heavy beam-rifle. The beam struck Bartol with a glare of blue-white light—and splashed.

With the helmet on, Bartol was just as impervious to ordinary beams as the assassin who was even now burning his way down through the Palace. Like the assassin, all he had to do was avoid anything as heavy as a semiportable.

Bartol stepped directly into the blazing muzzle of the rifle. The tremendous energy being reflected from his body shield dazed the android. Bartol jerked the rifle from its hands and burned it down. He swung around just as two more of the things rounded a nearby corner. They, too, went down before the white-hot beam of the rifle.

Then he stepped toward the wall. Under the tremendous power of the special body shield, the wall flowed like wax in a candle flame. It hardly slowed him at all.

He stopped for a moment, concentrating. Where was his enemy? Dimly at first, then with greater power, the intricate amplifier of the helmet picked up the brain radiations of the man he was look-

ing for.

In his ear, the speaker was still gibbering.

Bartol stood a moment longer, synchronizing the helmet with the signals. Then, having located his enemy, he began to move again.

He headed for the elevators. There was only one. The other ended two levels above. It must be the one.

He pushed his way through the door and dropped down the open shaft. The antigravity field allowed him to drop rapidly, but not too rapidly; even that marvelously designed helmet couldn't do everything. It would slow his fall somewhat, but it couldn't lift him.

His feet struck the top of the elevator car whose cables he had cut. He changed the polarity of his field and the force was applied vertically instead of radially. His feet melted their way through the top of the car. He reversed the polarity again before he touched the floor of the car.

The assassin upstairs was running amok, burning down everything in his path and working his way downwards.

BARTOL HESITATED just for a second before he went onward. The elevator bar had dropped only a few feet before its brakes had stopped it. Bartol lifted him-

self up to the level of the floor, burned his way through the elevator door, and stepped out into the corridor.

He saw the heavy-duty beam-cannon just as the android behind it fired. It was to his right, a few yards down the corridor. The blast of energy roared down the corridor, narrowly missing Bartol as he threw himself back into the elevator. It swung downward, gouging gobbets of flaming metal from the wall, aiming straight for Bartol.

There was only one way out of the trap. Bartol switched polarity again and turned his generators up to maximum. It wasn't enough to stop that heavy beam, but —

He leaped over the coruscating beam and literally dived headfirst into the wall on the other side of the corridor. It melted and gassified before him, hardly slowing his plunge.

He rolled over and landed on his feet. He kept on running toward the rear wall — through it. He circled through the next room and the next, dodging twice the heavy-duty beams aimed at him. The whole section was becoming a raging inferno; without his body screen, the heat would have been unbearable.

At last he came to the wall he was looking for. It shimmered slightly, due to the force field that

surrounded it. Just in front of the wall, two androids were swinging a heavy-duty cannon around toward him. He fired his own weapon, but they were shielded by more than the portable shields they wore. This section was *really* fortified!

He dived toward the androids, sliding under the barrel of the projector just as it blazed into white-hot hell.

He jumped to his feet and landed a punch on the jaw of the nearest android. It reeled backwards, and the other jumped him. Bartol flipped the second android over his head, slamming it into the face of its partner. They both went down. With two quick blows, he knocked their skulls against the floor. The metal skulls didn't break, but the metal-colloid brain within ceased to function because of the shock.

Now came the crucial part. He stepped over to the wall and touched its shimmering surface. It was an ordinary KF-4 field; it had no reactive surface, as did his own. Good! It could be analyzed.

The mechanism in the helmet went to work, carefully synchronizing its own vibratory frequency with that of the wall. It was slow work; it would take a full twenty seconds, and in that time, plenty could happen.

It was stupid not to build all

the walls with force-fields that would make them impervious to beam guns. But then, the whole set-up on Apollyon was stupid. These petty Autarch-Assassin games could only have been set up by a madman.

Five android guards ran into the room, firing their beam-rifles. Bartol ignored them; the beams couldn't touch him. Two more started to pull in a wheeled semi-portable. They got it in through the door and swiveled it toward Bartol.

At that moment, the mechanism in the helmet synchronized with the wall's force field. Bartol slid *through* the field, melted through the wall, and stepped through to the other side.

He hurled himself to the floor instantly as two coruscating beams of ravening heat met at the spot where he had stood. There was another semiportable inside the *real* citadel of the Autarch of Apollyon.

Before the Autarch could swivel the gun, Bartol had leaped on him, slamming him to the floor.

"Don't kill me!" screamed the man. "I'll do anything! Just don't kill me!"

On the other side of the wall, the androids found themselves helpless. The force field was still up, and they had been forbidden to

enter the citadel.

"I don't intend to kill you," Bartol said. "Not unless you act up."

He cut off the man's body shield and pulled the handgun from his holster. Helpless and disarmed, the man cowered on the floor as Bartol stood up.

HE HAD NEVER SEEN this man before. The Autarch didn't look anything like the man Bartol had been doubling for. The Autarch was thin and old-looking. Hatred and fear blazed in his eyes.

"So you're Lavod Quom," Bartol said. "Alias the Autarchs of Apollyon, alias the Peace Commander."

"How did you know that name?" the man almost screamed, his voice was so shrill. "Where did you hear it?"

"We have our ways," Bartol said. "But never mind. I'm here to tell you that you are under arrest in the name of the Galactic League. The charges are planetary slavery and mass murder."

"But — but — how did you do it?" He lay there on the floor, still shivering.

"It took a lot of thinking," Bartol told him. "We've known what you've been doing for a long time now. You set up this little dictatorship so that you could play

God with its people. We knew that the Commander was a remote control robot — operated by you. So were all the Autarchs who made public appearances.

"Then, every five years, you had the Benevolent Society of Assassins pick out someone to kill the Autarch. At the same time, you picked someone to double for the Autarch. Your twisted mind liked to watch two men fight to the death.

"It didn't matter which one won. If it was the phony Autarch, you simply put him under suspended animation for use five years later. If it was the assassin, he was immediately killed and an android was made up to duplicate him. Either way, you were safe."

"But you couldn't have known!" Lavod Quon said. "You couldn't have!"

"We did, though," Bartol said bluntly. "But we had to do it legally — we had to stop you according to your own laws. That is the Rule of the League.

"We've had that helmet planted in your palace for two years, waiting for this moment. The Autarch android was studied carefully, and the agent who looked most like him — myself — was sent here. Your records were tampered with so that it would look as though I had always been a citizen of

Apollyon. I was put under deep hypnosis, and false memories were implanted. It had to be deep so that your own hypnosis wouldn't dig anything up. But my compulsion vanished as soon as the assassin entered the Palace.

"It was all perfectly legal, you see. One human assassin is allowed. That was me. It's perfectly legal to use trickery. The other assassin which is causing so much trouble upstairs is an android — a special job, like your Peace Commissioner. It's controlled by a League man. But that android hasn't killed anyone but androids, anymore than I have."

Quom sat up. He giggled foolishly. "You mean *I* set it up? I brought you here? I picked you out? Why, that's wonderful! Nobody but me could defeat me — and I did it! That was quite a performance, young man; quite a performance. I'll see that you're properly rewarded. I'll make you Autarch! Yes! And give you a medal, too! I have lots of pretty medals! And I'll make you another uniform—with more gold on it!" Then he looked up, almost wistfully. "And this time, can I wear a pretty uniform, too?"

As he had been babbling, Bartol leaned over and gently grasped both his hands.

"Sure you can have a uniform."

"With gold on it?"

"With diamonds," said Bartol. And then the special energy flowed through his hands from the helmet, and the old man collapsed into painless unconsciousness.

Bartol released him and said softly. "Only I don't think you'll want anything that gaudy when the League psychiatrists finish with you."

THE END

★ *Twenty Thousand Leagues...* ★

THE ASTONISHING SUCCESS of the U.S. Navy's *Nautilus*, the first full-fledged atomic submarine, is reflected in the activity of all navies around the world. In particular the *Nautilus* achieved an average speed of sixteen knots, for thousands of miles! This unheard of speed for a submarine especially sustained for such a long period, has caused submariners everywhere to re-evaluate the undersea craft.

From a naval standpoint, aside from the surface rocket-armed ships which are now being built, the submarine is the ship of the future. Powered by atomic engines and armed with guided missiles, both undersea varieties and sea-to-air types, it is an invincible weapon.

The experience of the *Nautilus* proved this in many ways. For one thing, the atomic engines required no attention whatsoever. Behind its concrete and lead shield, the reactor produced the heat which generated the steam which drove the turbines. No man could enter it - nor did one have to. Electromagnetic pumps drove the heat exchanging fluid. Steam poured from the boiler and the turbine was satisfied.

Sonar operated with the efficiency

of television. The Navy is not talking about its sonar developments, but it is not hard to imagine what is being done in this field. The chances are that a cathode ray tube displays an image of what surrounds the submarine just as clearly as a surface radar would. In a word the modern submarine has been given eyesight.

For the occasional surface forays which must be made, there is an adequate radar. But an atomic submarine surfaces only when necessary and chooses mostly to keep only its snorkel intake busy for air.

The atomic submarines are finally being designed as pure hydrodynamic vehicles, intended to slip through the water with the sinuosity of a shark. No protruberances mar the sleek surfaces. Stream-lined and wakeless, the atomic submarine uses every kilowatt of power to move.

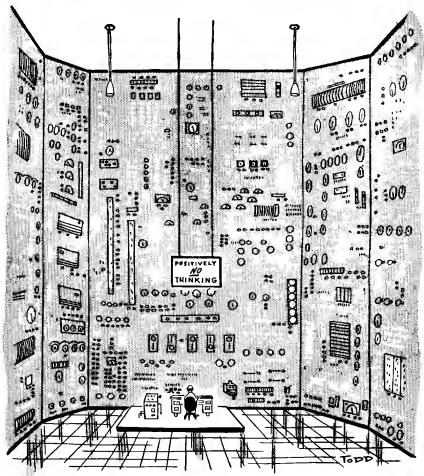
A remarkable by-product of this work with undersea craft, is the application of many of the experiences to what eventually will be space ships. Submarines and space ships are surprisingly alike. Only their media differ. And of course

there is gravity. But the isolated oneness of a submarine crew is an ideal place to study the same situation as it will exist in "space-going" craft.

The effectiveness of atomic reactor shielding is another useful

piece of information to rocket men.

From a naval standpoint the use of the submarine as a rocket launching platform is all important. And the atomic powered submarines do not require surfacing to launch their guided missiles!



SIX FRIGHTENED MEN

by

Randall Garrett

It was an unexplored planet and anything could happen—yet none of us expected to face a creature impossible to fight, let alone kill . . .

YOU PUT YOUR LIFE on the line when you join the Exploratory Wing of the Space Corps. They tell you that when you sign up. The way they told it to me, it went like this:

"You'll be out there on alien worlds where no human being has ever set foot — worlds which may or may not have been inhabited by hostile alien creatures. You take your life in your hands every time you make a planetfall out there. Still interested?"

"That's old stuff," I said. "You don't think I'd join up if it was an old ladies' tea party, do you?"

Which was how I happened to be crouching behind a fantastically-sculptured spiralling rock out on the yellow wind-blasted desert of Pollux V, huddling there with the fierce sweep of sand against my faceplate, looking at the monster that barred my

path.

The thing was at least sixty feet tall and all eyes and mouth. The mouth yawned, showing yellow daggers a foot long. As for the eyes — well, they burned with the cold luminosity of an intelligent and inimical being.

I didn't know what the thing was. One minute I'd been examining an interesting rock formation, a second later I was hiding behind it, watching the ravaging thing that had appeared out of nowhere.

Other members of the expedition were sprawled here and there on the desert too. I could see Max Feld, our paleontologist, curled in a tight plump little ball under an outcropping of weathered limestone, and there was Roy Laurence, the biochemist, flat on his stomach peering at the thing incredulously.



Back behind me were three others — Don Forster, Leo Mickens, Clyde Hamner. That made six. The two remaining members of the team, Medic Howard Graves and Anthropologist Lyman Donaldson, were back at the ship. We always left a shift of two back there in case of trouble.

And trouble had sure struck now!

I saw Laurence swivel in the sand and stare goggle-eyed at me. His lips moved, and over my helmet radio came: "What the hell is it, Phil? Where'd it come from?"

I'm a morphologist; I'm supposed to know things like that. But I could only shrug and say, "A thing like that could only come from the pits of Hell. I've never seen anything like it before."

I HADN'T. We had been fine-combing the broad windswept plain in front of the ship, looking for archaeological remains. The planet was uninhabited, or so we thought after running a quick check — but Max Feld had discovered relics of a dead race, an exciting find, and we had all fanned out to help him in his search for more.

We had been heading toward a flat mountain wall that rose abruptly from the desert about a mile from the ship when — from

nowhere — the creature appeared, towering above the desert like a dinosaur dropped from the skies.

But no dinosaur ever looked like this one. Sixty feet high, its skin a loathsome gray-green quivering jelly with thick hairy cilia projecting, its vat-like mouth gaping toothily, its cold, hard eyes flicking back and forth, searching for us as we flattened ourselves out of sight, it was an utterly ghastly being. Evolution had gone wild on this planet.

And we were cut off from the ship, hemmed between the mountain wall and the creature.

"What are we going to do?" Clyde Hamner whispered. "He's going to smell us out pretty soon."

As he spoke, the monster began to move—*flowing*, it seemed, like some vast protozoan.

"I'm going to blast it," I said, as it oozed closer to us. Cautiously, I lifted my Webley from its shoulder-holster, turned the beam to *Full*, began to squeeze the firing-stud.

A bright white-hot beam of force leaped from the nozzle and speared the creature's eye. It howled, seemed to leap in the air, thrashed around —

And changed.

It became a boiling mass of amorphous protoplasm, writhing and billowing on the sand. I fired

again into the mass — again and again, and the alien creature continued to shift its form. I was cold with horror, but I kept up the firing. My bolts seemed to be absorbed into the fluid mass without effect, but at least I had halted the oozing advance.

It reached one final hideous stage: a giant mouth, opening before us like the gate of hell. A mouth, nothing more. It yawned in front of us —

Then advanced.

I felt noxious vapors shoot out, bathing my thermosuit, and I saw a gargling larynx feet across. I fired, again and again, into the monster's throat.

My companions were firing too. We seemed to have halted the thing's advance. It paused some twenty feet from us, a wall of mouth.

Then it disappeared.

It blinked out of sight the way it had come—instantaneously. For a moment I didn't realize what had happened, and fired three useless charges into the space where the monster had been.

"It's gone," Hamner exclaimed.

My hands were trembling — me, who had stood up to Venusian mudworms without a whimper, who had fought the giant fleas of Rigel IX. I was shaking all over. Sweat was running down my entire body,

and the wiper of my faceplate was going crazy trying to blot my forehead.

Then I heard dull groans coming from up ahead. One final grunt, then silence. They had been coming from Max Feld.

Looking around cautiously, I rose to my feet. There was no sign of the creature. I ran to where Max lay.

The plump paleontologist was sprawled flat in the sand, face down. I bent, yanked him over, peered in his facemask. His eyes were open, staring — and lifeless.

IT WASN'T TILL we got back to the ship that we could open his spacesuit and confirm what I thought I saw on his face.

Doc Graves pronounced it finally: "He's dead. Heart attack. What the devil did you see out there, anyway?"

Quickly I described it. When I was finished the medic shivered. "Lord! No wonder Max had an attack. What a nightmare!"

Donaldson, the anthropologist, appeared from somewhere in the back of the ship. Seeing Max's body, he said, "What happened?"

"We were attacked on the desert. Max was the only casualty. The thing didn't touch us—it just stood there and changed shape. Max must have died of fright."

Donaldson scowled. He was a wry, taciturn individual with a coldness about him that I didn't like. I could pretty much guess what he would say. No expression of grief, or anything like that.

"It's going to look bad for you, Doc, when it's discovered we had a man with a weak heart in the crew."

The medic stiffened. "I checked Max's heart before we left. It was as good as anyone's. But the shock of seeing that thing —"

"Yeah," Don Forster said angrily. "You'd have been shivering in your boots too if that thing had popped out of nowhere right over *your* left shoulder."

"Keep your remarks to yourself, Forster. I signed on for the Exploratory Team with the same understanding any of you did — that we were going into alien, uncharted worlds and could expect to meet up with anything. Anything at all. Fright's a mere emotional reaction. Adults — as you supposedly are — should be able to control it."

I felt like hitting him, but I restrained myself. That ordeal out on the desert had left me drained, nerves raw and shaken. I shrugged and looked away.

"Well?" Hamner said. "What do we do? Go home?"

It was said half as a joke, but I

saw from the look on young Leo Mickens' face that he was perfectly willing to take the suggestion seriously and get off Pollux V as fast as he could.

To forestall any trouble, I said, "It's a tempting idea. But I don't think it would look good on our records."

"You're right," Hamner agreed. "We stay. We stay until we know what that thing is, where it came from, and how we can lick it."

WE STAYED. We spent the rest of that day aboard ship, having called off the day's explorations in memory of Max. The bright orb of Pollux set about 2000 ship time, and the sky was filled with a glorious sight: a horde of moons whirling above. The moons of Pollux V were incredible.

There were *one hundred* of them, ranging in size from a hunk of rock the size of Mars' Deimos to one massive high-albedo satellite almost a thousand miles in diameter. They marched across the sky in stately order, filling the Polluxian night with brightness.

Only we didn't feel much sense of wonder. We buried Max in a crude grave, laid him to rest under the light of a hundred moons, and then withdrew to the ship to consider our problem.

"Where'd it come from?" Doc

Graves asked.

"Nowhere," I said. "Just nowhere. One second it wasn't there, next second it was. It vanished the same way."

"How could that be?" Donaldson asked. "Matter doesn't work that way; it's flatly impossible."

Holding myself in check, I said, "Maybe so, Donaldson. But the thing was *there*."

"How do you know?" the anthropologist persisted, sneering a little. "You sure it wasn't a mass illusion of some kind?"

"Damn you," Forster shouted, "*You* weren't there. We were — and we saw it. *Max* saw it. Ask *Max* if it was there!"

Evenly, Donaldson said, "On the basis of your description, I'm convinced it must have been an illusion. I'm willing to go out there and have a look first thing in the morning — either alone or with any of you, if you can work up the courage. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll go with you."

THE NEXT MORNING we left the ship, clad in thermosuits, armed to the teeth — at least I was. I carried a subforce gun and a neural disruptor; Donaldson scornfully packed only the prescribed blaster.

We crossed the flat plain to-

gether, without speaking. I led the way, looking back nervously every few paces, but there was nothing behind me but Donaldson. We made a complete reconnaissance of the area, picked up a few interesting outlying fossils — Donaldson thought they might be relics of the dead race of Pollux V — and reached the bare face of the mountain without any difficulties.

"Well?" Donaldson asked sneeringly. "Where's your monster this time? He afraid of me?"

"So it didn't show up," I snapped. "That doesn't prove anything. For all we know it might jump us on the way back to the ship."

"So it might. But I doubt it. For one thing, I've been checking footprints in the sand. I've counted six tracks — one each for you, Feld, Hamner Laurence, Forster, and Mickens. Unfortunately, that doesn't leave any for your monster. There's no sign of him anywhere."

I was a little startled by that. I glanced around. "You're right," I admitted, frowning. Licking dry lips, I said, "There ought to be some trace — unless the wind's covered it."

"The wind hasn't fully covered the traces of you six yet," Donaldson pointed out with obstinate logic. "Why should it obliterate only those of your nemesis?"

I scowled, but said nothing.

Donaldson was right again — but I still found it hard to convince myself that what we had seen was only an illusion.

On the way back to the ship, I formulated all sorts of theories to explain the creature. It was a monster out of subspace, generated by etheric force; it was a radiation-creature without tangible physical body; it was —

I had half a dozen conjectures, each as unlikely as the next. But we returned to the ship safely, without any trouble whatever. I was sure of one thing: the creature was real, no matter what hell-void had spawned it.

WHEN WE RETURNED, I saw the tense faces of the men in the ship ease.

"All right," Donaldson said. "We've both been out there and come back. I say we ought to investigate this place fully. There's been a high-level civilization here at one time, and —"

"Suppose it's this monster that killed off that civilization?" Forster suggested.

"Then it's our duty to investigate it," I had to say. "Even at the cost of our lives." Here I agreed with Donaldson; monster or no, it was our job to fathom the secrets of this dead world.

We agreed to explore in twos,

rather than risk the customary complement of six all at once. Two men would go out; five remain within, three of them space-suited and ready to leave the ship to answer any emergency call.

Mickens and Forster drew the first assignment. They suited up and left. Tensely, we proceeded about our shipside duties, cataloguing information from our previous stops, performing routine tasks, busying ourselves desperately in unimportant work to take our minds off the men who were out on that desert together.

An hour later, Forster returned. Alone.

His face was pale, his eyes bulging, and almost before he stepped from the airlock we knew what must have happened.

"Where's Mickens?" I asked, breaking the terrible hush in the cabin.

"Dead," he said hollowly. "We — we got to the mountain, and — God, it was awful!"

He sank down in an acceleration cradle and started to sob. Doc Graves fumbled at his belt, drew out a neurotab, forced it between the boy's quivering lips. He calmed; color returned to his face.

"Tell us about it," Hamner urged gently.

"We reached the back end of the plain, and Leo suggested we

try the mountain. He thought he saw a sort of cave somewhere back in there, and wanted to have a look. We had to go over that sharp rock shelf to get in there.

"So we started to scale the cliff. We were about a hundred feet up, and going along a path maybe four feet wide, when — when —" He shuddered, then forced himself to go on. "The monster appeared. It popped out of nowhere right in front of Leo. He was taken by surprise and toppled over the edge. I managed to hang on."

"Were you attacked?" I asked.

"No. It vanished, right after Leo fell off. I went down to look at him. His facemask had broken. I left him there."

I glanced around at the tight-jawed, hard faces of my crewmates. No one said a word — but we all knew the job that faced us now. We couldn't leave Pollux V until we'd discovered the nature of the beast that menaced us — even if it cost us our lives. We couldn't go back to Earth and send some other guys in to do the job. That wasn't the way the Exploratory Wing operated. We had a tradition to uphold.

WE DREW LOTS, and Hamner and Donaldson went out there to recover Micken's body. They encountered no hazards, and

brought young Mickens' shattered body back. We buried it next to Max's. The monster had taken a toll of two already, without actually touching either.

It was almost like some evil plan unfolding to wipe us out one by one. I didn't like it — but I didn't have anything too concrete to base it on, not till the fifth day.

I was teamed with Donaldson again, and I felt strangely confident about our safety. So far the monster had yet to materialize any time Donaldson was out on the plain. That fact had been in the back of my mind for quite a while. It was the only clue I had.

We prowled over the plain, which by now had been pretty well finetoothed, and then I suggested we try the cave where Mickens had met his fate.

"I don't like the idea," Donaldson said, eyeing the narrow shelf of rock we would have to walk across. "You remember what happened to Mickens, and —"

I laughed harshly. "Don't tell me you're beginning to believe in this monster of ours?"

"Of course not. Mickens simply had an attack of vertigo and toppled off; Forster's active imagination supplied the monster. But that shelf looks treacherous. I'd just as soon not go up there."

"You're not talking like an Exploratory Wing man, Donaldson. But it's okay with me if you want to wait down here. That cave might be a goldmine of artifacts. We ought at least to have a look."

His hard face dropped within his mask. "No — I couldn't let you go alone. You win," he said. "Let's try the cave."

We began the climb — and it was, I saw, a deadly road. It narrowed dizzily — and while the drop was only a hundred feet, which a man could survive if he landed right, spacesuits weren't made to take falls of that sort. And without a suit, a man was instantly dead on this methane-ammonia atmosphere world.

We were about ten feet out on the ledge, I in the lead and Donaldson behind me, when I heard him gasp.

"Great God! There it is!"

I felt him lurch against me in sudden terror, nearly heaving me into the abyss, but somehow I steadied myself, dropped to my knees, hung on. I turned.

He had avoided a fall too. But I saw no monster.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It came out of the air right next to me — just popped out of the void and vanished again. I saw it, though." His voice was hoarse. "I apologize for everything

I've said. The thing is real. If it weren't for your sure footing we'd both have gone the way Mickens did."

He seemed almost hysterical. There was no sign of the monster, but I wasn't going to take any chances out on this ribbon of rock with a hysterical man.

"Let's go back," I said. "We'll try to get to the cave some other time."

"All right," Donaldson said, shaken. We turned and inched our way back along the shelf to safety, and half-ran to the sanctuary of the ship.

But once we were inside and I was thinking clearly again, I began to sprout some suspicions.

I REASONED IT OUT very carefully. Every time Donaldson had gone out previously, the monster had failed to show. There wasn't another man aboard ship who hadn't had some encounter with the thing. And some of them were remarking about Donaldson's apparent luck.

So this time we're out on the shelf, and the monster *does* show up — but Donaldson's the only one who sees him, after staunchly denying its existence all along. It seemed to me that it might only have been pretense, that he had faked seeing the monster for some

reason of his own.

I didn't know what that could be. But I had some ideas. Donaldson, after all, had been a member of the first party to explore Pollux V, the day before the exploration that killed Max. I had remained on the ship while that group had been out.

Suppose, I thought, Donaldson had found something on that first trip, something that he hadn't bothered to tell the rest of us about. Something he might want badly enough to kill all of us for.

It was pretty far-fetched, but it was worth a try. I decided to explore Donaldson's cabin.

Ordinarily we respected privacy to an extreme degree aboard the ship. I had never been in Donaldson's cabin before — he never invited anyone in, and naturally I never went uninvited. But this was a special case, I felt.

The door was locked, but it's not hard to coerce a magneplate into opening if you know how they work. Donaldson was in the ship's lab and I hoped he'd stay out of my way till I had a good look around.

The room was just like any of ours, filled with the usual things — a shelf of reference books, a file of musictapes, some minifilms, other things to help to pass away the long hours between planets. It

seemed neat, precise, uncluttered, just as Donaldson himself was crisp and reserved.

I moved around the room very carefully, looking for anything out of the ordinary. And then I found it.

It was a black box, nothing more, about four inches square. It was sitting on one of his shelves. Just a bare black box, a little cube of metal— but *what* metal!

Beyond the backness was a strange unearthly shimmer, an eye-teasing pattern of shifting molecules within the metal itself. The box had a sleek, alien appearance. I knew it hadn't been in the cabin when we left Earth.

With a sudden rush of excitement I realized my mad guess had been right. Donaldson *had* found something and kept news of it back from the rest of us. And perhaps it was linked to the deaths of Max Feld and Leo Mickens.

Cautiously I reached out to examine the box. I lifted it. It was oddly heavy, and strange to the touch.

But no sooner did I have it in my hands when the door opened behind me. Donaldson had come back.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING with that?" he shouted.

"I —"

He crossed the cabin at top speed and seized the box from my hands. And suddenly the monster appeared.

It materialized right in the cabin, between Donaldson and me, its vast bulk pressing against the walls. I felt its noisome breath on me, sensed its evil reek.

"Donaldson!"

But Donaldson was no longer there. I was alone in the cabin with the creature.

I backed away into the far corner, my mouth working in terror. I tried to call for help, but couldn't get a word out. And the beast squirmed and changed like a vast amoeba, writhing and twisting from one grey oily shape to another.

I sank to the floor, numb with horror—and then realized that the monster wasn't approaching.

It was just staying there, making faces at me.

Making faces. Like a bogeyman.

It was trying to scare me to death. That was how Max Feld had died, that was how Leo Mickens had died.

But I wasn't going to die that way.

I rose and confronted the thing. It just remained in the middle of the cabin, blotting everything out behind it, stretching from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, changing from one hell-shape to another and

hoping I'd curl up and die.

I stepped forward.

Cautiously I touched the monster's writhing surface. It was like touching a cloud. I sank right in.

The monster changed, took the dragon form again—much smaller, of course, to fit the cabin. Teeth gnashed the air before my nose—but didn't bite into my throat as they promised to do. Nervelessly I stood my ground.

Then I waded into the heart of the monster, right into its middle with the grey oiliness billowing out all around me. There seemed to be nothing material, nothing to grapple hold of. It was like fighting a dream.

But then I hit something solid. My groping hands closed around warm flesh. I started to squeeze.

I had a throat. A living core of flesh within the monster? It might be. I constricted my fingers, dug them in, heard strangled gasps coming from further in. I couldn't see, but I hung on.

Then a human voice said, "Damn you—you're choking me!" And the monster thinned.

Through the diminishing smoke of the dream-creature, I saw Donaldson, and I was clutching his throat. He still held the black box in his hand, but it was slipping from his grasp, slipping....

He dropped it. It clattered to

the floor and I kicked it far across the cabin.

The monster vanished completely.

IT WAS JUST the two of us, there in the cabin. I heard fists pounding on the door from outside, but I ignored them. This was between me and Donaldson.

"What is that thing?" I asked, facing him, tugging at his throat. I shook him. "Where'd you find that hell-thing?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he wheezed.

My fingers tightened. Suddenly he drew up his foot and lashed out at my stomach. I let go of his throat and fell back, the wind knocked out of me. As I staggered backward, he darted for the fallen box, but I recovered and brought my foot down hard on his outstretched hand.

He snarled in pain. I felt his other fist crash into my stomach again. I was almost numb, sick, ready to curl up in a knot and close my eyes. But I forced myself to suck in breath and hit him.

His head snapped back. I hit him again, and he reeled soggily. His neat, precise lips swelled into a bloody mass. His fists moved hazily; I blackened one of his eyes, and he groaned and slumped. Fury was in my fists; I was avenging

the honor of the Exploratory Wing against the one man who had broken its oaths.

"Enough. . . enough. . ."

But I hit him again and again, till he sagged to the floor. I picked up the black metal box, fondled it in my hands. Then, tentatively, I threw a thought at it.

Monster.

The monster appeared in all its ugliness.

Vanish.

It vanished.

"That's how it works, isn't it?" I said. "It's a thought projector. That monster never existed outside your own mind, Donaldson."

"Don't hit me again," he whined. I didn't. He was beneath contempt.

I threw open the door and saw the other crewmen huddled outside, their faces pale. "It's all over," I said. "Here's your monster."

I held out the black box.

WE HELD COURT on Donaldson that night, and he made full confession. That first day, he had stumbled over an alien treasure in the cave beyond the hill — that, and the thought-converter. The idea came to him that perhaps, as sole survivor of the expedition, he could turn some of the treasure to his own uses.

So he utilized the thought-converter in a campaign to pick us off

one by one without aiming suspicion at himself. Only his clumsy way of pretending to see the creature himself had given him away; else he might have killed us all.

Our rulebook gave no guide on what to do about him — but we reached a decision easily enough.

When we left Pollux V, taking with us samples of the treasure, and other specimens of the long-dead race (including the thought-converter) we left Donaldson behind, on the bare, lifeless planet,

with about a week's supply of food and air.

No one ever learned of his treachery. We listed him as a casualty, along with Max and Leo, when we returned to Earth. The Exploratory Wing had too noble a name to tarnish by revealing what Donaldson had done...and none of us will ever speak the truth. The Wing means too much to us for that.

And I think they're going to award him a posthumous medal...

THE END



Endlessness . . .



IT IS UNFORTUNATE that we take the idea of space travel so casually. As we do, we fail to realize the fantastic accomplishment that it will be. We tend to lose some of the awe and wonder with which men first greeted the very conception.

So far as we know the only science fiction author to convey the grandeur, beauty, endlessness and remoteness of space, is Arthur C. Clarke in his fine "Sands of Mars." When the reporter is taking his first trip to Mars and he stands near one of the ports and meditates upon the immensity of the Solar System, then you have some idea of how fast our simple Solar System is.

And mind you, he is thinking in terms of the trip to Mars. What conception would one have say on

the first Jovian or Neptunian journey? The thought is certainly awesome.

It is not our intention to suggest that we stand back and say "how grand" with all the naivete of a tourist at the Grand Canyon (although that's how we'll feel!). Rather we want to impress upon all of us, the simple and overwhelming size of the Solar System. To do this by quoting distances, miles, light-years or the like is not to convey the message at all. Numbers are meaningless when applied to such distances.

Nor is an analysis of time suitable.

We would suggest, so far as we know, the poet's approach -- and to do that, to use the poet's appreciation of this magnificent conception, read

Arthur C. Clarke's "Sands of Mars."

We have long held the thesis that the familiar contempt with which we quote Solar interplanetary flight is based upon this lack of real appreciation so effectively conveyed in the best of science-fiction writing. There are numbers of authors who do this job well, but Clarke and Heinlein manage above all to produce this "My God, it's unbelievable!" effect.

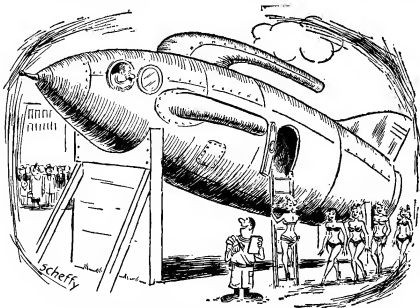
The numerical approach to an understanding of spacial distance is not altogether useless. But sometimes it is more effective when measured in terms of energy necessary to do the job.

Fifty million miles to Mars?

What's that? What is fifty million of anything? But look through a quartz space port, catch the flicker of the sun's troposphere, see the glare of light on an aluminum surface against "the black of night." Feel for a moment the aloneness.

We can't do these things in fact yet, but there are some writers--we've mentioned them enough! who have done the job for us. They know in some subjective intuitive manner what we will one day experience.

Perhaps the poet was righter than we know and more directly concerned with the knowable than he imagined - - . . . and the firmament declareth the glory of God . . ."



"Last of the supplies are coming aboard now, sir."

Can Man Tolerate Space?

by

Dr. Jack Parkhouse

Is too much emphasis on space travel being put on the development of suitable machines? What of the problems facing the men who will fly them?

FOR MANY YEARS now since man discovered the existence of other planets, it has been a matter of conjecture and dispute as to whether or not he would ever be able to thrust his way out from his mother planet into outer space. There have been many learned arguments for and against the possibility of science ever producing a vehicle capable of lifting itself and a crew against the mighty pull of earth's gravitational field.

The attendant practical engineering difficulties involved in such a project are tremendous indeed, but man has a habit of making his dreams come true and the practical difficulties of dispatching a missile into space have now been solved to a very great degree, due to the untiring research of men of vision in this field. It is even now proposed

that within a very short span of time we will have an artificial man-made satellite spinning around our planet, a little sister to our moon. Some would say that is still a very far cry from manned ships leaving the planet, but it is not very many years since our grandparents and great-grandparents were making emphatic statements to the effect that the human body is incapable of standing the tremendous speed of 30 miles per hour which was forecast for the new horseless carriages of that day. This seems a little ridiculous today, when an aeroplane capable of flying at over five hundred miles per hour is regarded as a trifle slow and behind the times.

In present day aeronautics of an experimental or military nature it is getting to be quite average for planes to be flown at altitudes well

in excess of fifty thousand feet, while with manned balloons heights in excess of one hundred thousand feet can be achieved. These flights are attended with many difficulties as would be appreciated by anyone who has seen the recent 20th Century-Fox production "On the Threshold of Space". Many of these difficulties are mechanical and will undoubtedly be solved by the designers and research workers, but there is one major problem now posed which no amount of mechanical design will solve.

In order to find a solution to this problem it is necessary to state the problem precisely. The problem is that of a man's ability or inability to tolerate space, and this problem is already being recognized as the factor which could influence man's proposed entry into inter-planetary travel.

The inability of man to tolerate space is already being evidenced in his experiences with the stratospheric flights. How many more times will this difficulty be magnified when he is actually in the vast emptiness of space itself? It is all very well to make machines which will travel out into space but it will not be a very satisfactory situation to man to find himself forever imprisoned on one planet while his playthings can be free of that restriction.

The obtaining of a solution to this problem presents an urgency of some degree. This problem is costing lives. It is costing the lives of some of our best and well trained pilots, men of experience whom we can ill afford to lose.

Should we be content to muddle

through this problem until it really becomes an emergency? If we do this and then attempt to solve it on an emergency basis without a proper understanding of the factors of the problem this will cost many more lives still and the problem will still not be solved. How much better it would be to look at the problem now in present time and solve it with care and without haste.

There are two major components to this problem. A man and his considerations—and space. What is this space? An emptiness. A nothingness, or more precisely, a viewpoint of dimension. The other factor is the man. What happens to a man when he is confronted by nothingness? The symptoms are many and varied on the surface, but when we look closely there are a number of symptoms which appear in all cases. These can therefore be regarded as the basic symptoms and the other minor varied symptoms as secondary symptoms of the nature of individual quirks.

What are these basic symptoms of "space sickness"? A queasy stomach is one, a sense of compulsory detachment is another. Others are a general lethargy or weakness. Fear, slow reactions, reduced efficiency, a sense of grief and loss. These are all in evidence at the comparatively low altitudes which have been achieved in the gondolas of balloons, still well inside earth's protective atmospheric envelope.

Should you wish to experience, if only to a mild degree, the effects of being asked to view a nothingness you could carry out the following experiment, but it will be necessary for you to be very, very honest

with yourself in order to gain the effect.

To do this it is simply necessary to spot a location in the space surrounding your body. By this is meant to really locate a location in space. Purely a location with no mass in it, real or imaginary. You should not line this location up with physical objects in the line of vision, but should locate the location purely of itself. If you do this accurately and just perceive the absolute nothingness of that pinpoint location you will experience to some degree the above mentioned effects. Another method of achieving this effect would be to imagine oneself surrounded in all directions, including up and down, by an infinity of space or emptiness or nothingness, holding the idea over and over again. If you try these simple experiments and gain this experience you will then have some idea of the magnitude of the problem facing a man completely surrounded by such a nothingness. If in the first experiment the perception of one little pin-point of nothingness can cause such an effect upon the body what will be the effect of observing total nothingness surrounding the body entirely. It is sometimes necessary to perform this experiment a number of consecutive times before it is accurately performed and the effect experienced.

Why should this affect man so? All he is being asked to do is to view nothing. This is, of course, exactly opposite to what man usually does, which is to view something all of the time. Therefore this problem is intimately connected with mass and nothingness, or to be more

specific, with barriers and freedom. A man born on earth is subjected from that moment to the gravitational pull of the planet. He is always also in close proximity to the huge mass of the planet at all times. He is thus continually conditioned to the expectancy of the continued existence of that mass in close proximity to himself. The mass acts at all times as a barrier or restriction to his movements. His considerations, his actions, his limitations and, up to this time, his location has been monitored by this overwhelming mass and its effects upon him. Thus to suddenly remove him from its proximity and effects entirely causes the necessity of a complete readjustment of all of the man's considerations which have been based upon this one constant fact.

In people where this close proximity of mass is considered by them to be not only extremely desirable but absolutely necessary, it could almost be said that they have interiorised into the planet. At least to all intents and purposes they have, as until these considerations are changed these persons could not tolerate the idea of removing themselves from this solid mass to any degree. In certain low level cases where these considerations are in operation in the extreme, it is even intolerable to them to leave the mass of their house. The amount of space in a roadway is too much for their level of toleration of space. Another higher level is the poor sailor who gets sick as soon as he sets foot upon a ship, even if that ship is tied up in harbour and the water is as smooth as a mill pond.

He considers he has lost too much mass or proximity to mass as soon as he leaves dry land and is surrounded by water which is mass of a lower density than that with which he was accustomed. A very interesting observation made by a research department of the United States Navy was to the effect that survivors from small boats such as motor torpedo boats consistently recovered much more rapidly than survivors from the sinkings of large and heavy ships, such as destroyers and aircraft carriers. This effect which they were observing was once more an illustration of man's reaction to the loss of mass. Where the men were survivors of small boats with little mass they recovered much more rapidly than men who were survivors from large and massive ships.

When a man is sent up in a high flying aeroplane he loses contact with the mass of earth which he is accustomed to living. This results in a sense of loss which is not evident on an analytical level but which is very evident in its effects upon the man's abilities when this loss occurs.

The effect upon a pilot subjected to this situation is a terrific reduction in efficiency during the period of the considered loss. Pilots who are well trained, and, while on the ground or flying at relatively low altitudes, have excellent control over their aircraft, are able to absorb readily the data which is being given to them on the many dials in the cabin. Their reaction times are fast and precise and they can do all that is needed to keep that aircraft well under control,

but when they get too far up, and this consideration of "too far" would vary greatly among individuals, all this training goes by the board and he becomes a terrified speck of humanity, lost in the immensity of the space that surrounds him.

What happens when this occurs? Well, if the pilot had the matter fairly well under control, he would be able to bring a plane down to lower altitudes and then, apparently miraculously, regain the abilities of clear thinking and efficiency he had lost while being so far away from mother earth. But unfortunately many of the test pilots who are working on this high altitude question do not survive to tell us what happens. From an outside viewpoint it would appear that the pilot suddenly goes crazy and puts the plane into a power dive from which there is no return. This is a demonstration of the pilot's automatic desire to get back as quickly as possible to that mass to which he is accustomed. He is not in a condition though, while he is worried over the loss of that mass, to think logically, and the power dive very often ends in a fatal crash.

This whole problem which is affecting the progress of man in this field of endeavor will be magnified many times over when he eventually builds a vehicle capable of leaving completely the gravitational field of earth. This will not be too evident during the ascent because the pilot will be too busy and on top of this he will be subjected to such forces of acceleration which will give him the illusion of being surrounded by a great deal

of mass, but when the acceleration factor is no longer in effect, when the ship is in free-fall the effect upon a pilot would be tremendous. Science Fiction writers have sometimes envisaged men as coming back as drooling idiots after venturing into space. They could be correct.

What can be done about this problem? The research department of the Hubbard Association of Scientologists International with headquarters at 1812 Nineteenth St., N.W. in Washington, D.C. has been aware of this problem for some time and a great deal of investigation into it has been accomplished. Further investigation is still continuing and will continue until it is possible to prove a man against this "space sickness" through the techniques evolved in the research.

The question posed in the title

of this article was "can man tolerate space"? It is obvious that under present circumstances he cannot. It is our belief that the reason he cannot tolerate space is because of his fixed considerations, agreements and habit patterns on the question of mass and nothingness. To be able to tolerate space would be an ability indeed and in Scientology we deal with the creation of human abilities.

Since the days of Icarus in Greek mythology it has been man's goal to be free from the restrictions of enforced and continual contact with the planet's surface. Will man ever really achieve this goal? The indications from our research are very promising and this research will continue to its successful completion.

Can man tolerate space?

Yes, when we show him the way.

The mind technology that was developed for use in space:

SCIENTOLOGY: THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THOUGHT

by

L. Ron Hubbard

Send One Dollar to the HASI

Box 242-5B, Silver Spring, Maryland

Developed by L. Ron Hubbard, nuclear physicist and one of the great science fiction writers of all time. The book from which they get their psychological plots. This one you need.



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE COMPLETE BOOK OF SPACE TRAVEL

by Albro Gaul, illustrated by Virgil Finlay, \$4.95, 160 pages, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland, Ohio.

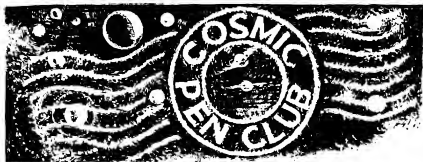
A wide selection of books introductory to the subject of space travel exists. Many of them are excellent, notably Ley's "Rockets, Space Travel and Missiles," and Clarke's "Exploration of Space."

This newcomer to the field, while not so poor as to require a blanket condemnation, still is so written down and diluted in subject matter, that it would certainly not be for adolescents or post-adolescents! It is in many respects a sound introduction to the subject; unfortunately it treats a dramatic theme rather coolly.

Perhaps the biggest fault with the book however lies in its uninspired illustrations. The bulk of Finlay's work is tired and hackneyed; those few illustrations which are good are suspiciously like the classic work of the artists who did the *Collier's* space travel series.

Let us say the book will do no harm. But if you are planning to arouse scientific curiosity or enjoyment in some youths of your acquaintance, go elsewhere for a selection.

One favorable point to s-f aficionados; Sam Moskowitz' historical supplement is amusing. While many of these pictures are old-hat, some are new — the covers of the "Electrical Experimenter" especially.



A department for all our readers throughout the world; here you can meet new friends who are interested in the same things you are. Listings are free, so send in yours today!

SEAFARER

Victor Gustine: Box 348, RFD 1, Pasadena, Md.

Age 39: "I'm an ex-seafarer, widower, and s-f fan since 1928 when I bought my first copy of a science fiction magazine. My major interests are studies of 'illogical happenings', the Time Concept, and the illusive phenomenon referred to as 'sixth sense'. With respect to the latter I'm particularly interested in so - called 'feminine intuition' and would like to hear from others with ideas on the subject."

HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR

Laurie G. Schoenbaum: 845 West End Ave., New York 25, N. Y.

Age 17: "I'm a senior here at Hunter High, interested in law, psychology, creative writing, cars, dancing, music — and naturally, science fiction! I'm five feet tall,

black hair, brown eyes, with the nickname of 'half pint' — but not intellectually! I'd like to write to anyone interested."

SHIPPING CLERK

Carroll W. Schaffer: 265 S. St. Andrews Pl., Los Angeles 4, Cal.

Age 30: "I work as a shipping clerk while attending night school, studying TV writing. Have been an s-f fan for 10 years and would like to write to other enthusiasts. I'm quite interested in s-f clubs."

CHESS HOBBYIST

Thomas D. Hritz: 407 W. Madison, Kirkwood, Mo.

Age 17: "I'm a student, science fiction fan, and chess enthusiast. I don't have many over-the-board players, so I'd like to find others interested in playing by mail. I'm also interested in foreign languages

— classical Greek and modern Czech particularly."

PHARMACIST

Harry M. Fish: 820 Wilshire Blvd., Santa Monica, Cal.

Age 50: "I'm a pharmacist by profession, and former Army Medical Corpsman. I'm quite interested in interplanetary travel and would like to contact others to discuss the subject."

STUDENT

James Wanger: 44 Custer St., Buffalo 14, N. Y.

Age 13: "I'm a student, interested in rocketry — theory and design. Other interests include chess, ham radio, and s-f writing. Also like all sports."

MUSIC TEACHER

Joie O. Drake: 623 Third St., Ann Arbor, Mich.

Age 25: "I'm a 'grass widow', mother of two small girls, music teacher (hawaiian guitar) by profession, with more than passing proficiency at piano and piano accordion. Enjoy both popular and classical music. Other interests include photography and sports. Will welcome correspondence on above — or practically any subject."

STUDENT

Peter V. Kane, Jr.: 241 12th St., West Babylon, N. Y.

Age 14: "I'm interested in corresponding with anyone who'd like

to exchange ideas on s-f. I'm particularly interested in the subjects of psi powers, Time travel, and Parallel Worlds."

AUTO MECHANIC

Nicholas De Morgan: Box 183, Ridgefield, N. J.

Age 32: "I'm an auto mechanic by trade, science fiction-fantasy collector by hobby. I'm interested in reaching other collectors to compare notes on files, swapping, etc. My file composes more than 2500 items."

STUDENT

Fred Schurch: 2567 Bainbridge Ave., New York 58, N. Y.

Age 15: "I'm interested in corresponding with others on science fiction, physics, and hypnosis. I'm a junior in school, 5' 10", active in boat racing, swimming, road racing, and on the more academic level, rocketry. Will appreciate hearing from others as soon as possible. Gals certainly not excluded!"

WOULD-BE WRITER

Alberta Leek: Oak Ridge, N. J.

Age 32: "I've been married 14 years and have six children, but this doesn't prevent me from following science fiction avidly. Matter of fact I'm Trade Manager of the International Science Fiction Correspondence Club. I've just completed a writing course, and have hopes of starting a writing career. I'd like to hear from any s-f enthusiasts."

WRITER

Thomas E. Wade: Marfrance, W. Va.

Age 52: "I'm interested in the study of advanced spiritualism, and advanced psychic science. I'm a writer on both subjects. Would like to reach others with similar interests."

STUDENT

Vincent Roach: RR 9, Box 220F, Indianapolis, Ind.

Age 12: "I'm an eighth grade student, and like equally well — girls, science fiction, and Elvis Presley! Will correspond with all rock & roll fans, s-f fans, science & radio bugs, and collectors."

AIRCRAFT WORKER

Robert L. Brown: 5154 Gloria Ave., Encino, Cal.

Age 27: "I'm single, working for 20th Century Aircraft Company as a Production Control Clerk. My hobbies are reading (s-f), good music, and movies. I'd like to be a pen-pal of anyone with similar interests."

STUDENT

Bonnie Dimitry: 1200 East Ave., Rochester 7, N. Y.

Age 15: "I'm a sophomore, 5' 5½" interested in writing to other sci-fi fans. My hobbies are collecting s-f books and magazines, and dancing. I'd like to join a sci-fi fan club, and would particularly like to hear from guys and gals in foreign lands."

ENGINEERING STUDENT

Michael J. Dunn: A-323 Emmons Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich.

Age 18: "I'm studying chemical engineering, with science fiction being my hobby. I'm interested in the more technical aspects of missiles and rockets, and shall be working during the summer at Chrysler Corporation's Guided Missile Dept. Other than my love for s-f, I like classical music, fencing, girls, cars, and short story writing. Also chess and hiking. Hope to hear from anyone with similar interests."

STUDENT

Daniel Pittinsky: 527 Hinsdale St., Brooklyn 7, N. Y.

Age 13: "I'm a science fiction fan who'd like to hear from others interested in same, and stamp collecting and chemistry."

ALUMINUM WORKER

Duane C. Foster: Gen. Del., Main P. O., Kitimat, B. C., Canada

Age 19: "I'm single, working in defense production of aluminum. My hobbies include astronomy, popular recordings, and solid and liquid fuel rocketry. Also photography, model railroading, and reading — mostly s-f. For sports I like pro football, and on the personal participation side, snow-shoeing. Would like to hear from guys and gals, particularly in Western Canada and Pacific Northwest area of America where I have traveled quite a bit."

HOBBYIST

Robert F. Martin: Box 961, Bronx, N. Y.

Age 21: "I'm a hobbyist, following jazz, basketball, history, science fiction, and coin collecting. Would like to hear from others similarly inclined."

"DOWN UNDER" FAN

Roger Dard: P. O. Box S1387, G.P. O., Perth, Western Australia.

Age 35: "I'm a long time science fiction and fantasy fan with a large collection of books and magazines, particularly British and Australian items. I'd like to swap books, magazines, or stamps of comic sections of U.S. Sunday Newspapers as I keep bound files in my collection and find them difficult to obtain in this part of the world. Will look forward to hearing from anyone."

STUDENT

Jack Sayers: 1280 Winston Ave., San Marino 9, Cal.

Age 16: "I've been reading s-f for nine years and hope to be a writer of same. I collect books and magazines and would like to hear from other s-f collectors."

HOUSEWIFE

Jeanette Nagle: 155 Xavier St., Denver 19, Colo.

Age 26: "I'm an avid s-f reader

and love to write letters. My husband and I are motorcycle enthusiasts and take our yearly vacation via cycle. Hope to contact others with similar interest."

FREIGHT RECORD CLERK

Knight W. Cashwell: Rt. 4, Box 630, Salisbury, N. C.

Age 42: "I'm a freight record clerk for the Southern Railway — comptometer operator. Favorite sports, baseball and boxing. Like poetry and philosophy, collecting good poetry and scenic cards from various places. Hope to receive many from pen-club fans."

STUDENT

Bruce Maguire: 3866 Nootka St., Vancouver 12, B. C., Canada

Age 17: "I'm a high school student, interested in science fiction, journalism, football, ice hockey, and dancing. Would like to correspond with guys and gals anywhere."

STUDENT

Denny Hill: Box 365, Palouse, Wash.

Age 15: "I'm an avid s-f fan, also enjoying a game of pool and swimming. Will correspond with all fans."

Ed. Note: In writing to us for your listing please include name, address, age, occupation, and subjects of your interest.

Do Yourself A Favor — Subscribe Right Now!

— SEE PAGE 130 FOR BONUS OFFER —

Murder is always a cold-blooded crime any way you look at it. But for outright cruelty and barbarism there was no equal to the actions of—

The Three Thieves Of Japetus

by

By Mark Reinsberg

THEY SAT HUDDLED TOGETHER in the tiny space-survival unit, watching the big rocket freighter draw closer to their drifting position off Saturn.

Jake moistened his thin purple lips and clenched the radiophone tighter. "Hello, freighter!" he repeated. "We're survivors of a shipwreck. Can you pick us up? Please answer." His voice grew more urgent. "Please pick us up! Our air supply is failing!"

Matt shook his thick black head of hair. "If they fall for this, they're stupider than I gave them credit for." His hand rubbed the gun hidden beneath his shirt.

A fierce cone of light flared in the freighter's forward rockets, brighter for an instant than the sun's remote disc.

"They are falling for it, Matt," Henry exclaimed. A wide grin spread over his pudgy baby-face.

"They're slowing down."

The radio receiver came to life. "Hello, survivors. We hear your message and are adjusting course to pick you up. Stand by."

Jake turned to his cohorts, a triumphant glint in his pale grey eyes. "I knew they would. What were you guys worried about?"

"They don't like to," said Matt. "Costs them time."

"Space law says they have to," said Henry.

"Space law!" echoed Matt. "There isn't a space patrol within two hundred million miles."

"Gosh, it's a big ship," said Henry. "Wonder what's in its cargo?"

"Yeah, Jake. How about telling us now?"

Jake smiled with self-containment. "I said it would be worth your while. Be patient a few minutes longer."



The cargo hold of the freighter opened. A rocket-propelled net shot out into space. Their tiny unit was caught up like a fish and dragged into the freighter's maw.

The first mate stood by as they clambered out of the unit.

"We sure do thank you," said Jake to the ship's officer. "Another hour and it would have been too late."

"Say," said Matt, "has your ship picked up any of the others?"

"No," said the mate. "How many more were there?"

"Seven, I think. We had a ship about your size. How many are in your crew?"

"Eight altogether," said the mate. "Perhaps you had better tell the captain about your accident."

He led them to the bridge. It

was a darkened compartment, with green luninescent control panel, and a great steel-glass turret overlooking the universe. Dominating the scene was a huge, dramatic closeup of Saturn, girdled by its thin, tilted rings.

"You are the captain?" said Jake to the grave elderly man at the controls.

"I am. You are the survivors?"

Jake and his companions bared their guns.

"Call your entire crew," said Jake, pressing the muzzle into the captain's side. "I want to see eight men in this room."

"Ah," said the captain sadly. "So this is what our mercy stop has let us in for."

THEY MARCHED THE eight crew members to the ship's air lock.

"Get in," said Jake.

"Surely it is not necessary for you to kill us," said the captain. "Why don't you set us adrift in a survival unit? Give us a fighting chance."

"Space death is such a terrible way to go," said the first mate.

"Get in," said Jake. "I haven't said anything about what I was going to do with you."

The eight looked at one another, then slowly, apprehensively, entered the air lock.

Matt pushed the button closing the inner door. Henry pushed the button opening the outer door.

Eight bodies drifted in space.

Jake took over the freighter's controls.

"You sure you can find your way to Japetus?" Matt queried. "That moon is just a glorified piece of rock."

"No trouble at all. Remember when we landed there? I left our ship's radio on, sending out a carrier beam. We'll just follow it in on directional-automatic."

"Hey, Jake," said Henry. "How about the cargo? I've been looking over the cargo manifest, and all it says is five thousand carboys of oxygen."

"Oxygen?" said Matt, with rising concern. "When we were on Titan you told us this ship contained something very valuable."

"Yeah, Jake, what's the story?"

"Calm down, you two. This oxygen cargo is the most valuable stuff in the solar system right now."

"Aw come on," said Matt. "All you have to do is breathe to get a lung full of it. Is this some joke?"

"Eight dead men aren't my idea of a joke," said Henry, a frown crossing his pudgy features.

"All right," said Jake. "This was top secret information on Titan.

There's been a bad leak in the city dome. They're losing tons of air every day, and so far no one's been able to find the hole."

"I didn't hear anything about it when I was there," said Matt.

"Of course not. The engineers have kept it from the colonists so there wouldn't be a stampede to get out. Because there aren't nearly enough ships to evacuate everybody."

"Then just where do we come in?" asked Henry.

Jake shook his head impatiently. "Can't you see? This is an emergency shipment of oxygen for Titan. Their reserves are just about gone. They figured it would take about ten days to check the entire dome, but they've only got about three days' supply of oxygen left."

Matt nodded approvingly. "I'm beginning to see it now. When that's gone, they'll pay any price to get more."

"You've got it," said Jake. "There's a Federation bank on Titan with assets of thirty million. We'll take every penny."

Henry was worried. "Well, what if they find that hole before the three days are up. Then we won't be in such a good bargaining position."

"In that case," said Jake, his grey eyes flickering like chalcedony,

"we'll make a new hole."

THEY LANDED on Japetus.

"Now, one of us has to deliver the ultimatum," said Jake. "One of us has to go back to Titan and tell them our terms."

"Isn't that pretty risky?" said Matt. "They'll hold that guy hostage."

"No, we aren't doing it that way." Jake withdrew an envelope from his coat. "We just get there and mail this registered letter to the city manager. It says, deliver the money to Hyperion, and no monkey business or we destroy the oxygen. That means, the city dies if anyone tries to tail us or pull a double cross."

"They won't take a chance when so many lives are at stake," said Henry. "And we'll each make ten million on the deal."

"All right," said Matt. "Which of us goes?"

Jake cut up three slips of paper. "Let's draw lots," he suggested. "That's the fairest way."

Henry drew the assignment.

"Be sure to bring back some whiskey," said Matt. "We forgot to lay in a supply."

Henry took off for Titan.

Jake turned to Matt. "Look," he said, "I arranged it so Henry would

take the letter because I wanted to talk to you. When you come right down to it, Matt, what need do we have for three people in the deal?"

Matt slowly nodded his thick black head of hair, as comprehension spread over his features.

"With just two people to divide up the pot, our shares would be fifteen million apiece," said Jake.

"And less chance of getting caught afterwards," Matt added.

They shook hands.

Henry returned from Titan eight hours later.

"I mailed the letter," he said. "And I bought the whiskey."

"Good," said Matt, "pour us all a drink."

Henry started to uncork the bottle. Jake and Matt reached for their guns and shot him simultaneously. A look of bewilderment crossed his baby face as he fell dead.

The whiskey bottle tipped over, but Matt retrieved it quickly, before more than half had spilled. With an amused look at the dead partner, he lifted the bottle to his lips and took a deep swig.

Matt handed the bottle to Jake, who drank several ounces. But his enjoyment was interrupted by a bleating sound from the ship's

proximity alarm.

"There's another ship nearby!" said Jake in alarm.

A rocket ship appeared suddenly overhead.

"That's a police ship from Titan!" Matt exclaimed. "But how on Saturn could they have known we were here?"

"They must have trailed Henry. That stupid fool probably took his time about buying the whiskey, and the letter got delivered before he left Titan!"

He strode to the ship's radio.

"It won't do them any good, though. I'll tell 'em I'll blast the entire cargo if they land!"

Abruptly, Jake felt a sharp pain in his belly. His throat and windpipe were dry, terribly dry and scorched.

"What's wrong with me?" he exclaimed.

Then he turned to see Matt doubled over in agony.

"The whiskey," Matt whispered hoarsely. "Henry. ."

"Poisoned!" Jake gasped. "The dirty double-crosser!"

When the police agents of Titan forced their way into the ship, they found the three thieves side by side.

THE END



"Which tall dark one, lady?"

He found himself five hundred years into the future, a man eagerly sought and he didn't know why. Then he found out. The future was a—

Woman's World

by

Robert Silverberg

COMING UP OUT of five centuries of sleep was like fighting my way up from the bottom of the sea. I was blind, I was choking, I was mangled by the pressure. All I could think was that I had to get up and out, up and out.

My sleep-cramped brain battled toward consciousness. The blackness around me gave way to deep violet, then gray, then a vague colorless dinginess as I rose to wakefulness. I moved my arms, tentatively, feeling the centuries-old numbness starting to give way. *This is what it feels like to be born*, my mind said.

Then, voices. Loud, strident, horribly painful to nerves that hadn't felt the impact of sound in five hundred years. A kind of terror ran through me; I cringed at the thought of the unknown future into which I had so boldly

plunged. It had seemed like a joke, once—but I had slept away half a millenium, and time for awakening was here.

Voices. Someone shouting, "He's mine! I got here before you did, Sam!"

Another voice: "The hell you did, Phil. I was here. You get out of here."

I shook my head foggily and stirred. Sam and Phil, whoever they were, were making much too much noise. I wanted them to go away; I was terribly tired, wanting nothing but another few hundred years of sleep.

I yawned and sat up. And gasped. For as I opened my eyes and gradually focussed them, I saw Sam and Phil. They were having a knockdown tussle, and it was hard to tell which one was on top.

But there was one thing I could tell: they were both female. One



seemed to be a magnificent brunette, wide-shouldered and fiery-eyed; the other, a redhead, lithe and wiry. They wore only skin-tight blue trunks; as they rolled over and over on the floor, I caught occasional glimpses of bare breasts and lovely flashing thighs.

I climbed out of my somnocasket and lowered myself to the floor of the chamber, wobbling un-

steadily. They ignored me, and continued to battle it out.

"Hold on, girls," I said finally. "This is no way to welcome a man from the distant past."

At my words they cut out the wrestling instantly. They clambered to their feet, glaring bitterly at each other, and turned to look at me.

They were really stacked. To

my astonishment I discovered that they stood nearly six feet tall, both of them, with high, proud breasts and tapering, well-muscled bodies. *What a pair of amazons.* I thought admiringly.

But they seemed to be doing some admiring too. The redhead emitted a most feminine sigh and said, "Isn't he *lovely!*"

"He certainly is," the brunette agreed. "Worth waiting five hundred years for."

With sudden dismay I realized I was naked. I reddened and grabbed for a cloth that had been draped over the somno-casket, and wrapped it around myself. I felt a little bewildered by things; I hadn't expected to be greeted by a pair of half-naked amazons when I woke.

The brunette nudged the other and said, "Let's get out of here with him now, Phil. We won't fight over him."

"Good idea," the redhead responded. "If we keep on fighting over who gets him, Her Majesty'll find out he's awake and take him away from both of us. Let's go!"

They approached me and grabbed me firmly, one on each side. "Come on, muscles," the one named Phil said. "Let's travel."

"Just a second," I said. "Who are you? Where are you taking me?" I didn't feel like trusting myself to these two till I had my

bearings.

"Don't worry about that, honey," Sam said. "We'll take good care of you." She winked broadly and said, "Won't we, Phil?"

They started to propel me out the door of the chamber. I was still a little too woozy to put up much of an argument, and they were both substantial specimens who knew how to swing their weight around. Weak as I was, I had no choice but to let them push me into the corridor.

"Where to?" Sam asked.

"To the Lower Quarters," Phil said. "There's a copter there, and we—oh, oh! Here comes trouble!"

I glanced over my shoulder and saw a truly gigantic woman coming down the corridor towards us. She looked about seven feet tall, a real monster. She was wearing the usual trunks, plus some sort of jeweled diadem dangling between at her bosom.

"Hold up there!" she bellowed. "Where are you three going? Where's the guard on the Sleep Chamber?"

Phil and Sam didn't stop to make conversation. They tightened their grips on my arm and started to run. I dragged helplessly for a couple of steps, then got straightened away and began to run with them.

"Stop! Come back!" the big woman yelled—and she came

roaring after us. The floor seemed to shake as she thundered along the corridor.

We fled. I allowed myself to be dragged along by my two amazon captors, with the third pounding away behind us. The corridor seemed to be endless.

And suddenly it stopped being endless. There was a horde of women coming up toward us from the other direction.

"The old cow's called the guards," Sam muttered. "We're caught, now!"

We were. The tide of female guards swept over us like a herd of cattle, and abruptly I found myself in the midst of a vast heaving mass of struggling women. At first I thought they were after Sam and Phil, who had tried to steal me and failed—but the truth dawned only after I had eluded the steel-like clutches of one powerful made-moiselle and fallen right into another's arms.

As she hugged me triumphantly to her surging bosom, I understood. They were after me.

Me.

Two dozen women, chasing after me. And I was still not really fully conscious from my long stay under suspended animation.

Maybe I'm dreaming! I thought.

No. No dream. I was at least wide-awake enough to tell that. The women were battling furious-

ly; I was being shunted back and forth from one to another. I was starting to feel like a plaything. So I struck back.

I landed a fist in a tough, unyielding female stomach, then splatted a hand into a pair of lovely lips. I was fighting for my life now; they were threatening to smother me. Two of them got me down, while a third grabbed one arm and tried to drag me away.

Suddenly I heard a loud voice yell, "*Stop!*" And an instant later, everything stopped. Completely. None of us could move a muscle. I was locked in the embrace of a wild-looking but rather lovely blonde, whose face was frozen in an expression of glee.

Only my eyes could move. I rolled them around and saw a woman in regal panoply stalking majestically toward us. She held a small metal weapon in her hand.

"You've all behaved *disgracefully!*" she said ringingly. She clicked the weapon at us a second time and the stasis broke. The horde of women picked themselves up and stood staring sheepishly at the floor. The Queen - - for her rank seemed obvious—swept imperiously toward me.

"Are you the Sleeper?" she demanded.

"I believe so, your majesty."

"Excellent. Come to my chamber

at once. The rest of you remand yourselves to the guardhouse, for punishment. Follow me, male!"

AS I FOLLOWED HER up the long corridor, I was struck by the humor of the situation. I had volunteered for the Somno-casket project after the bustup of my engagement; feeling that there was no place for me in the world of the twentieth century and that I wasn't much interested in continuing to live in it, I grabbed at a straw and let myself be tucked away in suspended animation, as a guinea pig. The scientists of five hundred years from now would revive me, and I would be a living man from the distant past.

So I had awakened. But in the intervening five centuries, while I slumbered under my time-lock, my casket had been shifted from Professor Ostrov's laboratory to this—this madhouse of furious amazons, and I was now apparently playing Adam to a few dozen Eves.

And now the queen bee herself had grabbed me off. Two guards prodded me from behind, and the Queen strutted ahead of me toward her private chambers. What waited for me there, I didn't know.

I wasn't to find out, either. Because as we came to a bend in the corridor, two men stepped out of

nowhere. Men—real males.

I was so astonished to see another unshaven face again that I froze and glared at them goggle-eyed. One of the men turned to me and said, "Help us! We're here to rescue you!"

That sounded good to me. So I took the club one of them handed me, and while they grabbed the two guards I clonked them—gently, but efficiently. The Queen finally caught on to what was happening, and turned.

She let out a howl. "Guards! Guards!"

I shut my eyes and pictured another madhouse and another wild chase back down the corridor. But this time it didn't happen. The two men nodded to one side. The wall opened, and we stepped in, out of sight.

Into an elevator.

Down, down, down. . . into the depths of the Earth, it seemed. Finally the elevator stopped.

"We get out here," one of the men said.

We were in a dank, dungeon-like place. We started up a cold, crawling corridor, but happily turned off before we had gone too far. One of my male escorts opened a door.

"Here he is, boss."

A man sat behind the desk—unshaven, naked to the waist. His face was aggressively male; his

bare chest was covered with a thick mat of black hair. "My name is Lola," he said, in a rumbling basso. "Welcome to our happy land."

"Lola?" I asked.

"Isn't it a beaut? The women take men's names now—and we get theirs. *Lola*," he repeated, bitterly.

"So that explains Phil and Sam, then."

"What?"

"Two chicks I met topside, before all the fuss began. I couldn't understand why they were named like that."

"Now you do," Lola said. "Let's get down to business: you come from 1957, don't you?"

"That's right. I—"

"You know what it's like to live in a world where *men* were supreme. Right?"

"Right."

"We're in a pretty bad fix here," Lola said. "The women grabbed control about three hundred years ago. It started with little things like running for office, and now it mush-roomed into *this*. We're under their heels! And we can't do a thing about it!"

"Why not? Do they outnumber you?"

"Yes and no," Lola said. "In terms of actual arithmetic, we're about even; they've got a slight numerical edge, not much. But in terms of battle strength, they've

got us licked. Most of today's men are weaklings."

"But you don't look like any milksop," I pointed out.

"I'm an exception. There's a pretty tight core of us, down here biding our time. We've planned a rebellion against the Matriarchs. But we need you, brother."

"Me? What for?"

"You've been asleep for five hundred years—and all that time, the world's been waiting for you to awaken. You're almost a demigod now—you're a historical figure. Imagine the impact if you come to life and spearhead a rebellion against the Matriarchs! You'll kindle the spirits of millions of downtrodden males who wouldn't have dared to do any such thing unless—"

"Wait a second," I said uneasily, thinking of the amazons upstairs. "I don't plan to get messed up in any private quarrels of this century, friend. Those girls look pretty tough, and I'm not going to risk my—"

"The hell you aren't," Lola said quietly. "We've been waiting for this day too long for you to mess it up now that you *are* awake. You cooperate or else."

I was tempted to ask what the "or else" was, but I didn't. There was too much menace hidden in Lola's flat voice.

"You're going to appear sud-

denly in Central Plaza tonight," he told me. "You'll use this photonic amplifier and tell everyone who you are. It'll attract a big crowd—and then you yell out, 'On to the Palace.'"

"At that moment, my men appear. There are about five hundred of us, and with them as a nucleus we recruit as many of the men in the Plaza as we can. We storm the Palace, take over the place, and on the impetus of that we bring the women under our dominance again."

I folded my arms. "Suppose I don't make your speech?" I could see myself getting assassinated, torn to pieces by wild women, or dying in any number of horrid ways.

Lola smiled. "Then we brainwash you and hype you up with something that'll *make* you give your speech. After that, we throw what's left of you away. Sound better?"

"I'll think it over," I said.

"Good." He glanced at one of his brawny underlings. "Clara, lock this guy up in the keep until we're ready to spring things. Then start getting the boys together, huh?"

I SAT ALONE in the dark and tried to figure things out. Somehow, the women had gotten the upper hand in this society, and most of the men were reduced to

mere milksops. Except for a handful of determined musclemen, that is, who were holed up down here ready to make a last stand against feminine supremacy.

Into this situation, enter me.

I was just an average joe in the past, a fellow who ran into some trouble and decided the easiest way out was to duck into this guinea-pig job. Some way out!

Apparently these women saw something in me—maybe there aren't enough men to go around, or something, and they jumped for me. So I got away from them. Talk about frying pans and fires, though!

I heard Clara's steady pacing outside my cell. They weren't going to let me out until the time came for my speech. And if I delivered the speech as instructed, some amazon was likely to nail me; if I didn't, Lola would take care of me. I was cooked either way.

I cursed myself for having left 1957 in the first place. But it was too late to worry about that now. I was here, and I was going to operate under my own steam or else.

And no matter which way I moved, I was doomed. Even if Lola and his men won, probably Lola's first action would be to put *me* out of his way, as a possible rival for his throne. And naturally if the women held the fort they'd

waste no time slitting my throat before I fomented another rebellion.

Maybe wishing wouldn't make it so, but I wished desperately to be back in the 20th century where I belonged. I practically yelled it out loud.

"I don't want to be here!" I yelled. "I should a stayed where I was!"

"Cut out that caterwauling," Clara growled. "You want the Queen to hear you? She's only a hundred stories above us, y' know."

"I don't care," I said miserably. "I'm going to die either way, so what does it matter?"

Then I realized the foolishness of my own attitude. I was due to face death; why not do it bravely? So I shut up. I waited.

Hours passed. Then the cell door swung open, and Lola walked in.

"Ready to go make your speech, pal? Remember—all of masculine mankind's future depends on the pitch you make."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go." But my knees were quivering, and I didn't really mean it.

He handed me a small round capsule. "This is the photonic amplifier. When I give you the signal, just switch it on and start to talk. You'll be heard all over the city."

"Downtrodden males of the world, unite!" I said, grinning despite myself. "All right, Lola. I'll

do what I can in the name of mankind."

"You'd better," he said ominously.

What happened after that is pretty hazy. Lola and Clara led me through a fantastic passageway into the open, and conducted me to the Central Plaza. I remember making a speech of some kind. I remember three of the amazon women racing madly toward me, trying to reach me and shut me up. I remember starting to run in the middle of my speech, turning, slugging it out with the three women. They were like pillars of stone. They closed in on me

And I blanked out. Sometime later, I awoke—

And saw the patient, kindly face of Professor Ostrov peering down at me.

"What are *you* doing here?" I demanded. "Did you suspend yourself too? And what's been going on?"

"This is the year 1957, son," he said calmly. "Everything is all right."

"Like hell it is," I snapped. "Where am I? What—"

"You're in my laboratory," he said. "You've been under-going preliminary psychological tests before I put you into the somnoscasket. I've been keeping close electroencephalographic check on you all the time you were living through

that purely fictional incident."

I sat bolt upright. "You mean that never happened?"

"Merely a test," he said mildly. "But I'm happy to report that you showed commendable adaptability in strange situations, that you handled yourself well—though we observed one momentary lapse in stability—and that, in general—"

I got off the table and silenced him. "I want to thank you, Doctor."

"What for?"

"For giving me a second chance," I said. I reached for my clothes and started getting into them. "I've had one look at the future, and maybe it was a phony, but it taught me one thing—life can't be any worse here."

"Are you, then, planning to withdraw from the experiment?" he

asked, gaping.

"Damned right I am!" I smiled happily, put on my coat, and left the lab without a further word. I knew now that there was no sense in running off to the future; things weren't any simpler there.

I knew what I would do: I would find my girl, take her out someplace, talk over all our misunderstandings. I was confident we'd patch things up somehow.

All I had to do to make our marriage work was be a little more considerate—and let her share the responsibilities, instead of trying to run the whole show myself. Yes, I thought, as I started down the familiar dirty old twentieth-century street. Women needed to be given more responsibility in running things

THE END



Amateur Atomic Physicists



THERE WAS A TIME when science-seeking kids were content to build radio transmitters and television sets. But today, the potential student is satisfied with nothing short of a physicist's laboratory. But the remarkable thing is that he can have it!

We're not speaking merely of Geiger counters available in the nearest hardware store. No, an enterprising embryo scientist need only pick up common, everyday equipment such as switches, motors, and the

like and he's in business.

For example, building a Van de Graf electrostatic high voltage generator is simple. An endless belt run by an electric motor over a pair of rollers, with a collecting comb - presto! - - there is a machine just like its daddy at MIT ready to deliver hundreds of thousands of atom-smashing volts. Many high school students have built these machines.

A high grade Wilson cloud chamber can be constructed with no ef-

fort at all. A glass cylinder filled with alcohol vapor and resting on a dry-ice chilled pan - - watch the atomic tracks! See the paths of cosmic rays. These are so common, no one thinks twice about building them.

Cyclotrons, betatrons and similar atom-smashing apparatus can be and has been constructed by high school students. It's a little more difficult - - but that's all.

It is perfectly conceivable that in a short time small atomic piles will be built. The danger of radiation of course will exist and this more than anything else would deter the would-be amateur physicist. But the danger of explosion would not exist. Critical masses could

easily be avoided.

Hardly a single instrument, from the electron microscope to the most sensitive radiation detectors exists, which cannot be duplicated fairly satisfactorily by the devotee.

The Science Competitions held over the country demonstrate some of the ingenuity of American youth. Almost every imaginable scientific project has been undertaken - - and with results. Often an original piece of scientific research is done at this level.

About the only realm closed to the amateur is the moon rocket - - and we wouldn't be positive or definite as to exclude that possibility from the amateur's repertory! Nothing is impossible to the amateur . . .



"Tell Commander Dodsworth that I've found traces of a really ancient civilization!"



Conducted by Robert Bloch

HAVE YOU EVER wondered what the conductor of this column thinks about while shaving in the morning?

You haven't?

Well, shame on you! A person would think you'd be interested. As a matter of fact, you'd better be, because I'm going to tell you just what passes through my mind.

Actually, of course, I can only tell you a small part of what goes through my mind, because this magazine must go through the mails.

But here goes, in dialogue form. Just for the sake of argument, the mirror will ask the questions and I'll provide the answers. (I tried doing it the other way, but it didn't work—my mirror doesn't know how to type. Of course, this is no reflection on it).

DIALOGUE WITH A MIRROR

Q: You've been in charge of FANDORA'S BOX for about a year now, haven't you?

A: That's right. I've done six issues, and the seventh installment is coming up.

Q: No wonder your hands tremble when you try to shave. Careful now—you'll cut off your sideburns and then you won't look like Elvis Presley any more.

A: Listen, after a year of working for Hamling, it's a wonder I don't cut my throat.

Q: You mean it's a wonder he doesn't cut it for you. But tell me, what have you accomplished in FANDORA'S BOX during a year's time?

A: Well, I reviewed about 85 issues of various fan magazines,

Q: Didn't you get any more than that?

- A: Yes, I must have received double that number, but there wasn't room to handle any more.
- Q: Not with you taking up space with foolish dialogues, there wasn't. So you actually saw about 170 fanzines, eh?
- A: Oh, many more than that. You see, in addition to magazines sent to me for general review, there are all the special amateur press publications from FAPA, SAPS, OMPA, and various NFFF mailings—
- Q: Never mind with the initial-dropping. How many fan magazines would you say you actually saw and/or read during the past year?
- A: About 300.
- Q: And what was the over-all effect of reading them?
- A: Eyestrain.
- Q: Didn't you learn anything? Didn't you come to any general conclusions? I mean, you had an opportunity, through the pages of all these publications from all over the world, to get a sort of panoramic picture of fandom as reflected in print today. Reading these fanzines, what did you learn?
- A: That you can't get away from Rotsler's illustrations.
- Q: Do you want to?
- A: His BEMS, yes. His women, no.
- Q: Stick to the point, will you?
- A: I didn't know there was one.
- Q: Look at the top of your head.
- A: Don't be rude.
- Q: Then answer my question. What did these fanzines tell you about current fandom?
- A: Well, for one thing, today's fanzines seem to help separate the men from the boys.
- Q: Meaning?
- A: Back in the early 1930s, when fanzines were in the formative stages of growth, there was a curious uniformity of editorial outlook.
- Q: That's not the way Moskowitz tells it.
- A: Oh, I don't mean that fans didn't feud or have differences of opinion. But their general outlook seemed to spring from a chronological least common denominator. Almost all of the fans were young men in those days. This gave them something in common.
- Q: What did it give them in common, smarty?
- A: A wish that more fans were young women.
- Q: Never mind that jazz, Dad. You were talking about a common youthful outlook. Meaning?
- A: Meaning that it was more or less taken for granted in those days that a science fiction fan was a young man in his late teens or very early twenties. This description characterized the overwhelming majority of fanzine editors, writers, artists, and readers. There was a resultant seeming uniformity in their hobbies, interests, economic and domestic status, and approach to the fan-field.
- Q: Look out, you're going to cut your chin.
- A: Thank you.
- Q: But you were saying that in the '30s fanzines were the reflection of youthful personali-

ties. Do you mean that adults weren't represented in their pages?

A: Not at all. But few of the adults were fans—technically speaking. They were pros who contributed material. And adult readers of science fiction, as such, seldom partook very heavily of the fan-activity. Fandom was almost the exclusive province of the young.

Q: And it's different today?

A: Very noticeably different. Some of the most outstanding fan-magazines are produced by people who have passed the 30-mark. As the Tucker survey shows - -

Q: What you said! Pick up that soap and wash out your mouth with it this instant!

A: Billllrrrrggggqqssssk.

Q: There, that's better. Now, you were saying —?

A: As a certain survey shows, a surprising proportion of present-day science fiction fans are married, have children, occupy responsible positions. Many of them are oldtime fans who have grown up with the field. They're still just as interested as ever, but naturally their fanzines look different, and read differently than the teen-age efforts.

Q: This bothers you?

A: Not particularly. But it does bother some fans—both young and old. You see, when you subscribe to a fanzine today, you can't be sure what you're liable to run into. You don't know if you'll get a 14-year-old kid trying to sound adult, or Doc Smith wearing a propeller

beanie.

Q: You mean the kids want to sound mature, and the grown-ups want to sound childish?

A: Sometimes their wants have nothing to do with the result.

Q: So what you're getting at is that today there are really two categories of fanzines?

A: Generally speaking, yes. There are, of course, exceptions: a few years back youngsters like Joel Nydahl and the then teen-aged Bob Silverberg were putting out fanzines which compared favorably to "adult" publications in every respect.

Q: Or every lack of respect.

A: Please! I'll make the funnies, if you don't mind. Don't get delusions of grandeur; who do you think you are—Ackerman?

Q: Speaking of age differences in fandom, is it true that Forrest J. Ackerman just celebrated his 40th birthday last November?

A: Yes. Before we know it, if the oldtimers continue in fandom, our fan magazines will have gone full cycle—from juvenile to adult and back again to second childhood.

Q: Well, did you come to any other general conclusions regarding the status of fan magazines today?

A: Only that there's a greater variety of content. Along with the spread in age-levels, there's a spread of personal background, experience and interest. In addition, the science fiction field has expanded so greatly that there are few fans left who can boast of reading *all*

the pro-zines, *all* the books, or keeping up with science fiction in every medium.

Q: All right, then. Suppose you take a newcomer to fandom who reads your column in IMAGINATION and starts thinking about subscribing to a few fan magazines. What advice would you give him?

A: I'd tell him not to expect miracles. With fandom the variegated and complicated hobby it has become at present, a stranger can't hope to pick out a fanzine at random, settle down to read it, and understand all the highly-personalized references at once. Nor will he enjoy it to the full, until he has gradually come to know the field. It actually takes a definite amount of study and concentration to orient one's thinking in relation to fan-activity today. The outsider, unaware of the private jokes and legends of fandom, is all too apt to conclude that it's a lot of damned foolishness.

Q: And the insider?

A: He *knows* it is. But he also knows that it's a lot of fun to participate in a hobby that calls for more than just being a collector or a sidelines observer. Fandom is not a mere spectator-sport. It's really an established institution.

Q: So is Alcatraz.

A: Well, if you insist on stealing all the best gags, I'm going to stop shaving this instant.

Q: What do you intend to do instead?

A: I think I'll get to work and review this batch of fan magazines.

AND THAT'S JUST what I intend to do. Here then, is a report on the latest issues to reach me before deadline: that is to say, the last fan magazines to be published in the closing days of 1956.

Here's the NYCON II MEMORY BOOK (K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. S., Moorhead, Minn.: \$1) and it deserves a word of explanation as well as description. To begin with, it's not a fanzine based upon last year's Convention, and Mr. Carlson is not, strictly speaking, the editor. He and Ray C. Higgs were coordinators of this project, which consists of a compendium of fanzines and specially-written material assembled by NFFF members and others for the purpose of commemorating the Convention. Spiral binding enhances the longevity of several hundred pages of fannish miscellany, including such interesting items as a comprehensive list of pseudonyms used by pro sf writers, a reprint of Hugo Gernsback's address to the 1952 Convention, a poetry section, a special article by oldtimer Milt Rothman and other highlights of particular interest to NFFF members. A big fat buck's worth — completists will want an extra copy for trading purposes. Incidentally, according to coordinator Carlson, there *will* be a supplement issued which will deal with the Newyorcon program. Undoubtedly it will be available by the time this notice sees print — if interested, contact him at the above ad-

dress.

If you have another buck available, you may be interested in PSYCHOTIC (Richard E. Geis, 1525 N.E. Ainsworth, Portland 11, Ore.:irreg.) and I hasten to add that Geis has put this price on his regulation-size fanzine in sheer self-defense, due to a limited-distribution policy. It will also be available in trade, provided editor Geis is willing. PSYCHOTIC returns after a period of suspended publication, due in part to the fact that it was getting to be too cumbersome to handle, and this time Geis is taking no chances. Those of you who are familiar with previous issues will know what to expect - - some of the best interlineations in the business, and some of the best material *between* the interlineations. Those of you who are familiar with the editor had better watch out - - Geis is much too sharp a character to risk getting familiar with. PSYCHOTIC, like GRUE and SKYHOOK and the old QUANDRY, serves to reflect the special interests and personality of its editor - and a most brilliant reflection it is, too. You may find yourself in disagreement with his viewpoint, but you won't be bored.

ECLIPSE has a new address (Ray Thompson, 628 S. 20th St., Omaha 2, Neb.: irreg.: 10c) but the magazine remains the same. Reviews, letters, a con-report by J.M. Graetz, plus articles by the editor and Herbert Beach round out this 30-page issue.

Electric multilith does a good job for SATA (Dan Adkins, RFD No. 2, East Liverpool, Ohio: bi-month-

ly: 20c) and so do the contributors this time around. Robert Coulson's FANDOM AS A WAY OF MARRIAGE is a charming bit of practical advice of value to any fan who may be contemplating matrimony. Since most fans aren't smart enough to just *contemplate* it, but insist on going right ahead and *committing* it, Coulson's suggestions are definitely in order.

Adkins pops up again as the cover artist on the 4th issue of FAN-ATTIC (John Champion, Rt. 2, Box 75B, Pendleton, Ore.: irreg.: 10c, 3/25c) and the line-up includes John Berry on parachuting, Champion on books, Jerry DeMuth on Presley, Moomaw on fanzines, ham on rye, and the usual letters and reviews plus a helping of fiction. An interesting *potpourri*, but therefore a bit difficult to *popourri*view.

(To people who object to bi-lingual hermaphroditic puns, my apologies. A liking for such puns is an acquired taste along with tomatoes, or human flesh. I can understand just how you feel because, personally, I can't stand tomatoes).

From across the pond we ponder on PLOY (Ron Bennett, 7 Southway, Arthurs Avenue, Harrogate, Yorks., England) but if you want to subscribe, send your 15c or your 50c for 4 issues to Bob Pavat, 6001 43rd Ave., Hyattsville, Md.

PLOY is a curious British fanzine, in that this issue does not contain an article by John Berry. As a matter of fact, there are very few *American* fanzines today which do not contain an article by John Berry. Be that as it may, nevertheless and notwithstanding, with

malice towards all and charity towards none, PLOY offers a factual and fictional assortment in 35 pages which employ five different colors of paper stock. A veritable WHO'S HUE of fandom.

From John Berry himself and co-editor Art Thomson comes the latest issue of RETRIBUTION (Arthur Thomson, 17 Brockham House, Brockham Drive, London S.W. 2, England: 3 for 25c) and between the two of them they have come up with a rather unique collection of witticisms and Britishisms.

The same holds true of TRIODE No. 8. It's published by Eric Bentcliffe and Terry Jeeves, but American subscriptions go to Dale R. Smith, 3001 Kyle Ave., Minneapolis 22, Minn. It's a quarterly, and you get 7 issues for \$1. Present issue features both editors, plus Mal-Ashworth, Dave Newman, Lars Helander and - - this is where I came in - - John Berry. The quantity of his production is amazing, and even more amazing is the quality. Of course, the British Isles have given us Shakespeare. To say nothing of Diana Dors. (Which is perhaps a good idea, if we want to get this magazine past the censors).

CONFAB (Bob Peatrowsky, Box 364, Norfolk, Ncb.) usually arrives folded, but with the current issue the editor announces that - although folded - - it won't arrive anymore. This final issue is almost entirely a letterzine. The editor, while abandoning publication, is not completely *gafia*: he announces that he will continue his interest while the mimeograph lies dormant.

We mourn the passing of CONFAB as we have, in the past, mourned the demise of many another fanzine. Sometimes we worry about all those ex-editors whose mimeos have gone dead; it seems a pity to think of them just sitting around while the rust gathers on their crankhandles and the moths eat away their equipment. But *ehu fugaces* and *sic transit gloria mundi*. To say nothing of Tuesday and Wednesday.

Still going strong, however, is YANDRO (The Coulsons, 407½ E. 6th St., North Manchester, Indiana: monthly; 10c, 12/\$1) and the present nonfiction issue contains movie reviews by DeWecse, fanzine reviews by the male half of the editorial staff, the usual letters from unusual readers, a column by Alan Dodd and a new column by Marion Zimmer Bradley. All very pleasant and sprightly material. YANDRO is one of the best things to come out of Indiana since Herb Shriner.

FANTASY-TIMES (Fandom House, P.O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, N.J.: twice a month: \$2 a year) continues to live up to its title of "The Science Fiction Newspaper" with full reports on the latest developments on both the national and international sf scene. After sixteen years there's not much one can say about FANTASY-TIMES except - - read it for the latest dope. It is truly the DAILY RACING FORM of the sf world. Which means it carries its share of plugs, nags, and winners, and seldom gets off the track.

A less-frequently scheduled publication is SCIENCE-FICTION

FIVE-YEARLY (Lee Shaw, 545 Manor Rd., Staten Island 14 N.Y.: lustrumly: 35c). "Lustrumly" means "once every five years" instead of what some people might think (or hope) and if you have been in fandom long enough to remember the previous issue, you'll want this one. There have been a few editorial changes - for one thing, the editor traded in her horse for a husband - but the magazine itself remains intact. Or intactless, as the case may be.

There is some wonderful prozine parody material here by Calvin Aaargh, L. Evan Tine, Nalrah Nossille, L. Sprague de Youngfan, Hans Santa Steffanson and a poem by Walt Liebscher (although I suspect at least one of these names is a pseudonym; possibly the last) plus assorted spoofs and speculations by John Berry, Richard Eney and Andy Young - who manages to do an entire article on **MAGNETIC CAT TIPPING** without once mentioning the magnetic pole-cat. But it's a real Lee Hoffman editorial job, 54 pages of it, with able assistance from Larry Shaw. The loud splash you just heard is the sound of me, going overboard for it.

Lee Shaw (who is one smart girl: after horse-trading to acquire a husband, she got herself *another* horse; thus proving you can have your cake and eat it too) also writes that copies of all issues of her **FANHISTORY** are available free on request from the address listed above however, enclosure of a stamp or two would be appreciated. Unused American stamps, that is.

No fair sneaking in used 1856 British Guiana 1c magentas, please.

INNEUNDO No. 3 (David Rike and Terry Carr: Box 203, Rodeo, Calif.: monthly) is available in return for a letter of comment, and for those who like non-serious, non-constructive fanning this is a must. In the midst of the funny business by editors Carr and Rike and a satire by Carl Brandon, you'll find an article by Jack Speer which gives the history of his famous **FANCYCLOPEDIA**. All this, and for free, too, so get out your fountain-pens and start scribbling to Rike.

VOID is here again, and Jim and Greg Benford have turned out a fat and sassy issue, international in flavor. You can get it in exchange for long letters of comment, but if you insist on paying cash, write to the Benfords c/o Lt. Col. J. A. Benford, G-4 Sect., Hq. V Corps, APO 79, New York, NY. And enclose your 15c, please. Judging from the names in the letter-column you'll be joining an illustrious fan-nish readership.

Also international is **ORION**, Paul Enever's quarterly. For a subscription you are directed to write to George Richards, 40 Arncliffe Road, Eastmoor, Wakefield, Yorks., England. But there is no mention of the price. The present issue contains plenty of Atom's artwork, separated by material from Enever, Daphne Buckmaster, Richards, and the readers. Plus - as if you hadn't already guessed it - an article by John Berry.

SCIENCE FICTION PARADE (Len J. Moffat, 5969 Lanto St., Bell Gardens, Calif.: quarterly: no

price) is here again, and welcome as always. Letters, reviews and news reports - - but handled with taste, style and humor in an excellent format. A real leader in the West Coast Renaissance: send a letter requesting an issue and see if you don't agree.

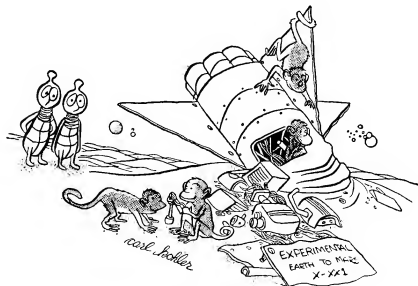
A newcomer just received is CONCEPT (Larry Ivie, 230 E. 26th St., New York, N.Y.: monthly: 15c) and while the magazine has not as yet evolved a permanent policy, it appears to be embarking on an ambitious program for the future. A few more issues will make assessment easier.

Tucker and whats-his-name are at it again in their SCIENCE FIC-

TION WORLD (Gnome Press, 80 E. 11th St., New York 3, N.Y.: quarterly: 10c) and as usual this offset newspaper makes a beautiful and convenient liner for the bottom of your birdcage. News, views, reviews, and deathless prose by two deathly pros.

But now it's time to wrap up this column and give it to the carrier pigeon who takes it down to the editor's office. Mail service what it is, editor Hamling suggested this method of delivery to me. Unfortunately, the cost of buying a new bird each time is rapidly breaking me. I wish Hamling would stop eating my pigeons!

See you next issue. —Bob Bloch



"I guess nothing upsets Terrans."

Letters from the Readers

GREAT NOVEL

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I just finished reading my first subscription issue of *Madge*, the February number, and I couldn't be more pleased. With no qualification necessary, **COMPETE OR DIE!** by Mark Reinsberg, is the best feature novel I have ever read in any s-f magazine. Let's have more from Reinsberg!

The Scheffy cartoons were great, as usual, and all of the short stories were good except one—**OUTCAST OF THE STARS**. It certainly wasn't good enough for *Madge*.

Joseph B. J. Rice

54 Lenox Pl.

New Britain, Conn.

Glad you liked Mark's story so well. We'll keep after him to produce more yarns—but his post as Public Relations Director of City College, University of Chicago keeps him pretty occupied. However, we guarantee Mark will find time occasionally to turn out stories for us . . . with

NEW S-F CLUB ANNOUNCED

Dear. Mr. Hamling:

I'd appreciate it if you'd make the following announcement to *Madge* readers.

A new, exclusive S-F club is being formed. Membership will be composed of s-f writers who have not as yet reached the age of 18. One member will be chosen from each of the 48 states and territories of the U.S. The organization will be centered around a fanzine to which each member will contribute material.

Applicants should send samples of their work along with a complete report of their activities in science fiction. Those who have printing facilities should include samples of their work also. We'd like to have prospective members write by May 15th.

William Ellis

Gen. Del.

Monticello, Ill.

with

Good luck!

UNDISTINGUISHED . . . ?

Dear Bill Hamling:

The February issue of *Madge* has arrived, and here for no particular reason is a going-over of it. I rarely write letters to comment on an undistinguished issue, but

Cover, to begin with, is up to your standard, and certainly better than some you've had in the past year. Editorial: yes, but have you nothing to say? This is an editorial? To the lead story, COMPETE OR DIE! This is completely undistinguished. And I am getting tired, oh so sick and tired, of chase scenes . . . THE MAN WHO MADE HIMSELF is the only good story in the issue. Cartoons average, Scheffy still funny. Bloch's column tops.

No criticism is complete without suggestions for improvement. I'll begin with some personal gripes. Item: I hate male & female robot cartoons. Item: Fan column heading should be changed, and I'm sure somebody (even you) can think of a better one than FANDORA'S BOX.

Is complaining about illos a lost cause? Rognan seems to be supplanting Terry, but when will I see the last Terry illo? When can you get another Freas drawing?

Stories . . . all right, I'm sure you pick what you think is best—but is that all?

Dainis Bisenieks
303 Hinsdale H., E.Q.
Ann Arbor, Mich.

How's the cover this month? And the stories, illos, cartoons, etc! As for changing the fan column title, we discussed this with Bob Bloch

when he took it over and Bob agreed with our thinking that it was so well established there was no point in changing it wh

THREE QUESTIONS

Dear Bill:

Just finished the February *Madge*, which was a great issue. I thought the beginning of OUTCAST OF THE STARS was a little weak, but that's only my opinion. Your cartoons all seem to have new ideas in contrast to the worn ideas of other s-f magazines.

If the grippers about your s-f stories will think a little they will find that there are only two types of story problems: one with a solution, one without. Only the dressing changes, never the plot.

I've got three questions: 1. How many issues of *Madge* are in a volume? 2. When are you going to change the book offer on your subscription page? 3. Where do you obtain film clips that show rockets taking off, movie monsters, etc?

Am looking forward to next issue.

Franklin Bergquist
Gen. Del.
Eddyville, Iowa

1. *Currently there are six issues of MADGE to each volume. The book offer is changed effective with this issue—see page 130. We don't exactly know how you'd get film clips—perhaps some readers will advise you—but you might try writing to Forrest Ackerman (915 S. Sherbourne Dr., Los Angeles 35, Cal.) for possible information. Anything going on in science fiction Forry will know about!* wh

BAD COVER LISTING . . ?

Dear Bill:

For the first time in many, many months (February issue) you've had a lineup with really capable authors instead of hacks . . . former being Randall Garrett and Charles Beaumont. Do you take advantage of the situation? Heck, no! When putting a Beaumont byline on the cover might sell more copies, you continue along your blind, dogmatic way, giving cover credit to the author of the longest story in the issue, whether big name or not.

Let me assure you that the name Mark Reinsberg means nothing, while Charles Beaumont stands for quality—for the slicks!

And you call yourself an editor. Hah!

Kenn Curtis
4722 Peabody Ave.
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

We learned, quite a few years ago, that "name value" on the cover is not a guarantee of increased sales for an issue. Most people glance through a magazine before buying it, and if they like what they see they plunk down their 35c. You'll no doubt agree with us that Robert Heinlein is the "biggest" name in science fiction. We featured Heinlein on a MADGE cover a few years ago, and while the issue and in particular Bob's story was well received, the net sale didn't reflect any appreciable gain. We cite this as only one example, and we could come up with quite a few. Most people are not impressed by "names" as such. Besides, how do you build a name?—one editorial procedure is

by featuring it, and we predict you'll see Mark Reinsberg grow in literary stature 'as time goes on wh

PLEASANT DISCOVERY

Dear Bill Hamling:

The other day a friend and I were taking some books back to the library and while there found an old issue of IMAGINATION in a pile of mysteries. The next day I read it, and while I certainly am not an expert on science fiction, I thought it was really good.

I rushed to the drugstore later and bought the February issue. My report is that you've got a good thing here!

Denny Smail
RR2
Covington, Ind.

Welcome into the fold, Denny. Now why not turn to page 130 and send in your subscription! That way you won't have to rush to your drug-store each issue wh

DOG-EARED GEMS

Dear Bill Hamling:

As far as I, my brother, and my dad are concerned, both *Madge* and *Imaginative Tales* are tops. By the time they have gone through the family they are dog-eared from stem to stern!

The cartoons are tops—especially the "Hairy BEM" series by Scheffy. I'd like to compliment your authors, in particular S. M. Tenneshaw and Ivar Jorgensen.

Denny Hill
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Palouse, Wash.

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You'll be seeing new stories by your favorites right along, Denny. And let's hear from the rest of the family sometime! wlt

TRANSPARENT PRAISE . . . ?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I like *Madge*. But not always. Allow me to explain.

Your fiction is mostly good. Has that "sense of wonder" you're always talking about. I enjoy it.

But the thing I dislike is your letter column. I agree with Steve Willett's letter in the February issue. You print letter after letter all singing *Madge's* praises, and if one letter does cuss you out you retaliate with missive after missive of congratulations. It is transparent. Surely, *Madge* is good . . . BUT: not that good!

I say Judith Merrill's opinions are worth a lot she has more literary taste than any other editor I've heard of. Her class of stories are beyond the reach of your magazine.

Madge has printed lots of good stories lots and lots. But how many of them will be remembered 50 years from now? They are stories not literature. Am I right in guessing that the anthology you mentioned referring to IMAGINATION was edited by the editor of a certain *Madge*?

So, I'll read your stories, but steer clear of your letter section.

Roger Ebert
410 E. Washington St.
Urbana, Ill.

We always welcome constructive criticism, Rog. But if most letters praise MADGE, what's wrong with

that? Everyone's entitled to his own opinion. Sure Judith Merrill is a good writer; if our readers preferred that type of story, we'd present them. 50 years from now? We doubt any s-f magazine yarns will be singled out for posterity. Tell you what, bring up the subject again 50 years hence. Then we'll know! The anthology? It was entitled "Flights of IMAGINATION" and it was edited by Ted Dikty, the best-known anthologist in the business. Bet you won't steer clear of the reader section after all. To take license with the Bard: "Methinks he doth protest too much!" . wlh

Dear Bill:

About a week ago I got hold of *Madge* and thought it was one of the best s-f magazines I've read. I certainly hope the Scheffy cartoons continue through the next 12 issues of my new subscription. That's quite a bargain, \$3 for 12 issues plus a free s-f book! Most other mags charge \$3.50 or \$4 without a book bonus. Good deal.

Lynn Weaver
2523 W. First St.
Grand Island, Nebr.

Best deal in science fiction! Ok, gang, turn the page and take advantage of it! wlh

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by
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